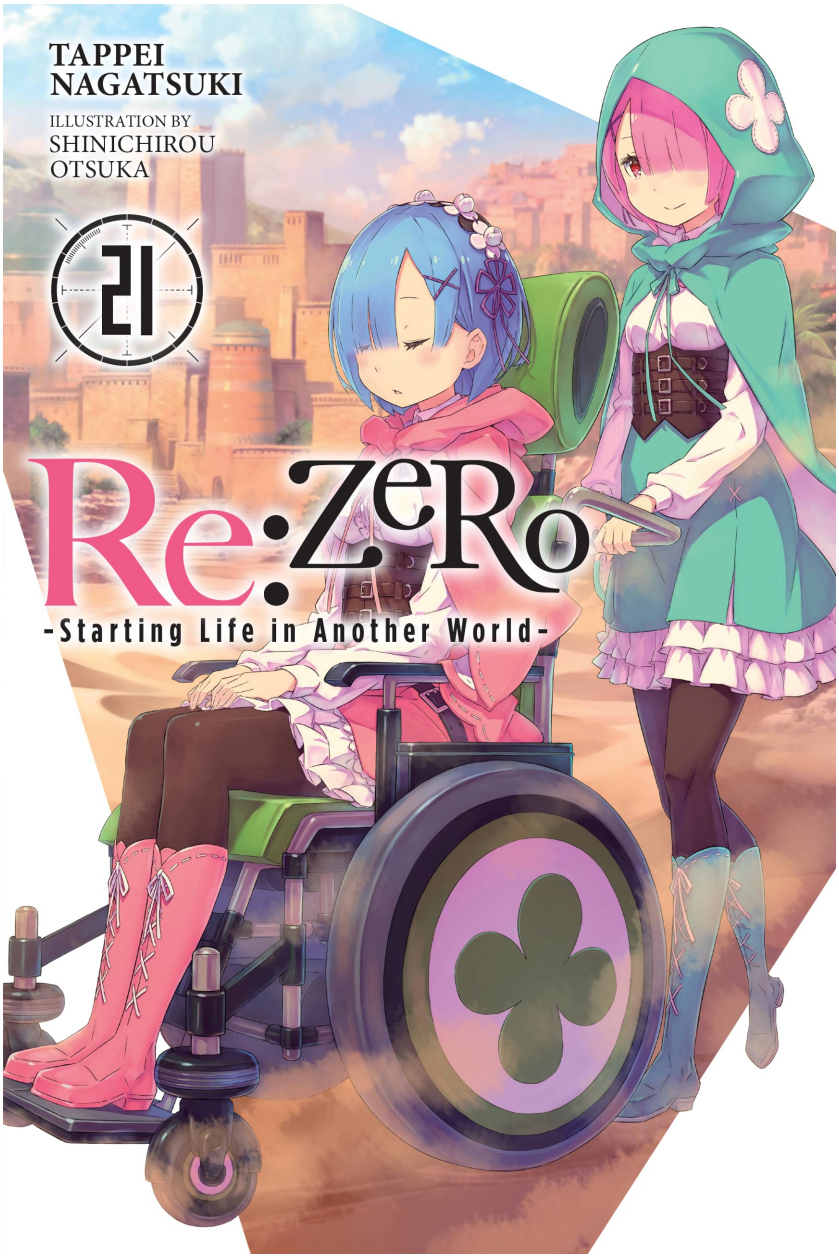
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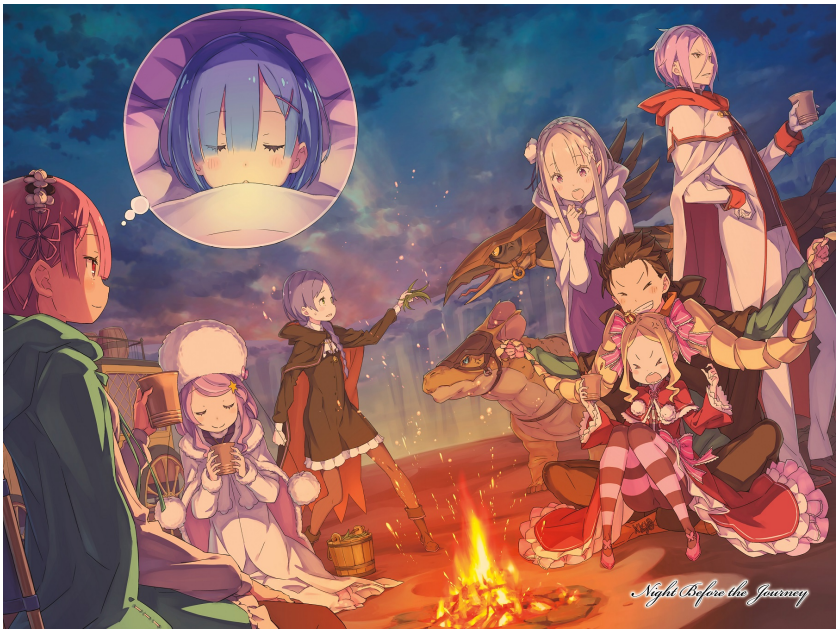
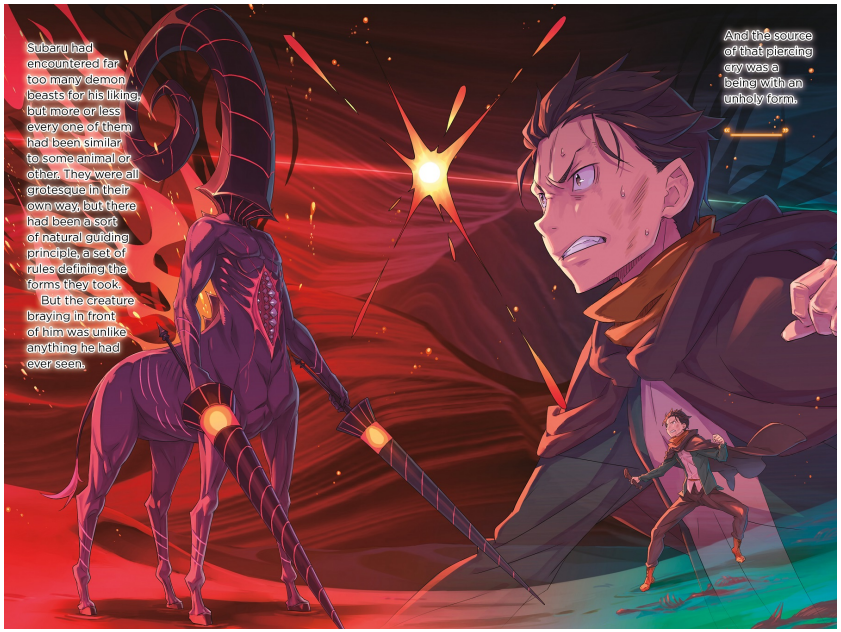

Night Before the Journey

"Psst psst psst."
Meili waggled her finger side to side while making noises to get its attention.
"Psst psst psst... psssssst."
After centering its focus on her finger, she pointed to the side of the carriage. Drawn by that, the oiran bear followed her invitation, slowly walking in that direction.


Subaru had encountered far too many demon beasts for his liking, but more or less every one of them had been similar to some animal or other. They were all grotesque in their own way, but there had been a sort of natural guiding principle, a set of rules defining the forms they took.
But the creature braying in front of him was unlike anything he had ever seen.
And the source of that piercing cry was a being with an unholy form.

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 21

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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NEW YORK

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TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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PROLOGUE

ON THE ROAD

"—I'm not actually the legitimate son of the Juukulius house."

Sitting formally on the ground in front of the campfire, Julius murmured those words with a gloomy tint to his eyes.

Subaru listened as he combed Beatrice's hair while she sat on his knee.

As an artificial spirit, her body was always immaculate and in optimal condition. Even so, Subaru considered it an important part of their bonding to always brush out her hair before bed. It deepened his connection with his precious partner while they peacefully chatted about how their day went.

"So why did you pick this exact moment to drop such a massive revelation on us?"

"Apologies. I was just thinking that if I let this moment pass, I wasn't sure when I would get another chance."

Subaru furrowed his brow as Julius responded, not looking nearly as apologetic as his words suggested. It was the sort of reaction that could easily be interpreted as haughtiness. That or the relaxed attitude that came with being among friends.

"So by not the legitimate son, you mean…?"

"In the sense that I am not the direct son of the current head of the Juukulius house. Alviero Juukulius, the current head, is my adoptive father. My father is his younger brother, Klein Juukulius. When my father passed away, my current family took me in."

"I see… Oh, then that means you have two fathers and two mothers," Emilia commented.

Julius's eyes widened for a moment. He almost seemed amazed by the idea, but then his expression softened slightly.

"That's right." He nodded, still smiling.

“? What? Did I say something strange?”

“No, not at all. If anything, it was just quintessential Emilia-tan. Very E M T.”

“Sorry, I have no clue what you are talking about.”

Subaru grimaced as Emilia pouted. She was practically sulking. He wasn’t trying to be sarcastic or anything of the sort, though. If he was being honest, her completely innocent and naturally kind way of thinking had been incredibly moving, and Julius probably felt the same way.

That was why he was just playing with his bangs like always.

“

on his cheek. It was Beatrice, who was leaning with her whole body against his chest. Fiddling with her hair, she looked at him fondly with those distinctive eyes of hers.

"If you're going to worry so much that it turns your head to mush, then you might as well focus on our skinship instead. Or else Betty's adorableness will go to waste."

"What are you talking abou…? Holy crap, it's true! I can see your cuteness evaporating into the air!"

"It is not! How rude! Betty is as lovely as always!"

She puffed out her cheeks and jumped down from his lap.

"I'm just kidding," Subaru said with a laugh.

Beatrice was unconvinced and went straight to Emilia, who was waving her over. She leaned against Emilia's chest as Emilia smiled.

"Emilia, it's about time for bed. Staying up all night is bad for the body."

"That's right. Why don't you sleep with me tonight as punishment for Subaru being mean."

"A fitting punishment."

The two of them were in total agreement that Subaru was the bad guy. Beatrice rubbed her eyes sleepily as Emilia took her by the hand. She glanced at Subaru while leading the little girl away.

After watching them go back to the dragon carriage, Julius spoke up.

"Those two are quite charming together."

"They look like the best of buds, right? Just a little over a year ago, they couldn't have been more different."

"It's hard to believe…in a single year? If you were involved, I suppose it's possible."

Subaru scratched his cheek as Julius looked at him, a twinkle in his eye. There was no denying that Subaru's presence was a part of it, but he felt acknowledging that fact would just come off as self-centered, so he quickly changed the subject.

"So about what you were saying before."

"You mean about my family?"

"Right. Emilia is a bit airheaded, and Beako was considerate enough not to say anything, but talking about the past in a situation like this is…"

"I know. I'm sorry if it added another burden."

Interrupting Subaru as he struggled to get the words out, Julius slowly shook his head. Seeing the way he was acting, Subaru

grimaced internally, like he had bitten into something especially bitter.

Due to the Archbishop of Gluttony's power, the memory of Julius—Julius's name itself—had been erased from the world. The very fact that he existed was torn from the minds of everyone who ever knew him.

It was the third way this affliction manifested, similar to and yet different from Crusch, who had lost her own memories, and Rem, who had been forgotten by everyone and had fallen into a deep slumber, lost in memory.

Subaru was painfully familiar with that feeling of despair that came with being isolated from the rest of the world.

When Subaru died and time rewound, he always returned with memories of a world that no one else could ever know about. He lost the bonds that he had painstakingly built more than a few times.

Even his friends at Roswaal Manor had forgotten him before.

"It's hard to relax with you staring at me like that, Subaru. If you have something to say, then why not just come out and say it?"

"You're…tch, you're a real piece of work, you know that?"

Subaru looked away.

One time I show a genuine bit of concern for him, this is what I get. That's the "finest knight" for you.

When Subaru had found himself in a similar situation, recovering all by himself had been a hopeless task. That was precisely why he understood just how amazing Julius was to have managed it alone.

But it pissed him off to admit it, so he just snorted dismissively.

"The only thing I want to do is register a complaint. Don't go bringing up stuff like that out of nowhere. It ruins the mood. And it's not something you should be telling me anyway."

"That's not true. It's nothing particularly special. Reinhard and Ferris know, and it is common knowledge among the other knights. Lady Anastasia also knows, of course. Or I should say, she knew."

"

Subaru, who was still sitting next to the fire.

"It's about time for me to rest. What about you?"

"I… I'm going to watch the fire a little bit longer. It's a safe road, but it's still better to have someone on lookout."

"Understood. Then I'll rest first."

With those parting words and a quiet nod, Julius left the fire and returned to the carriage.

Alone with his thoughts, Subaru stared at the flames and touched his right leg—the scar of the wound he had received in Pristella, the black pattern that wouldn't disappear.

"…What was that…?"

It was soft, almost indignant.

He didn't know whether he was talking about Julius or himself, but either way, an odd feeling of annoyance had gotten caught up like a little bone lodged in his throat.

"Agh, damn it. What am I, stupid? …Yeah, I guess I am…"

Scratching his head, he vented his annoyance. It wasn't going to make anything better, but he couldn't bring himself to not say anything, either.

He glared at the fire when a voice called out.

"—No need to go blamin' yourself so much, is there?"

It was an elegant, reserved voice coming from behind him. Subaru stopped scratching his head. Slowly turning around, he saw a girl with her hands clasped behind her back.

"It's hard to tell what I should call you on the spur of the moment…"

"You can just call me Anastasia now and every other time, too. If you don't, it'll be a problem for me."

The first half of what she said had an entirely different tone from the second half. Almost as if the person talking switched in the middle. Of course, the voice itself was the same throughout.

But the rightful controller of that body was no longer actually in control.

"Foxidna…"

"I'm not particularly attached to my name, but I can't deny that I feel a little bit of resistance at being called that, Natsuki."

The woman whose pale blue-green eyes were squinting at him was Anastasia Hoshin. Or at least, the body belonged to the royal candidate. However, someone else was inside. *Something* else.

At present, her body was being occupied by the white fox scarf

wrapped around her neck—the man-made spirit Echidna in disguise.

It was like a bad joke. An artificial spirit with the same name as the Witch of Greed was joining Subaru and company on their journey, all while continuing to deny that she was said witch.

Her presence was headache-inducing.

“I wish you wouldn’t be so suspicious of me. I’ve explained before that this situation isn’t what I wanted, either. I even took the job of acting as your guide on this dangerous trip.”

What she said was true. The success of their journey depended on her guidance. Without it, they had no hope of surviving the hell that forced even Reinhard into submission.

Despite acknowledging that, Subaru couldn’t get over the fact that she shared a certain witch’s name.

“Even so, my stance is that your creator is never to be trusted. Believe me, I’d trust you if I could. It would be easier that way.”

“Dearie me. My creator who I can’t even remember must have really done a number on you.”

“

“You look like you have even more things on your mind now.”

“…Were you awake?”

Just as he lay down on the seat, a voice called out to him. Opening his eyes, he saw Beatrice with her hair down standing next to the seat.

“There’s no hiding anything from you, is there?”

“That’s a bad habit of yours. You should share your concerns with Betty. Betty is far more attentive than you are.”

“…Yeah, that’s right. C’mere.”

Squeezing into the seat to make some room, she slipped in close so they could nuzzle together.

Beatrice was the only one who knew the depth of Subaru’s worries. She was also the only other person on the trip who knew that Anastasia and Foxidna had changed places.

The problem was Echidna—who he had been calling Foxidna to distinguish her from the witch. She was an artificial spirit like Beatrice, and she swore that she had no intention of harming Anastasia. Talking about it to others was bound to cause confusion and maybe alarm. But Subaru also needed to stay on guard. So as a compromise, he had shared the secret with Beatrice.

Considering Beatrice’s complicated feelings toward Echidna, he would’ve preferred to not involve her with another person who shared that name, but…

“Don’t worry about pointless things. You should just be yourself and ask for help from any and everyone. If nothing else, I praise your judgment in coming to Betty first.”

Good at listening and a charmer. Subaru smiled awkwardly at that compliment. All he could do was be grateful.

“I can’t just keep worrying forever. Tomorrow we’re finally gonna visit home.”

Patting Beatrice’s head, he braced himself for the first checkpoint on their journey.

Their ultimate goal was to reach the Sage’s watchtower, but their party was stopping by Roswaal Manor to prepare for the next leg of the trip and to report back on everything that had happened. However, there was another reason for passing through there—

“It ain’t no regular pit stop…”

In the grand scheme of things, it was a trivial, almost laughable reason. But for a small person like Subaru Natsuki, it was something that contained a powerful possibility.

This was an important detour to reunite with someone dear to him on the long, long road he had to travel before he could finally meet her again in the truest sense.

CHAPTER 1

A REASON TO BRING YOU

1

The trip from Pristella to Roswaal Manor was approximately ten days.

Going to the Water Gate City took about the same time, so it had been nearly a month since they first set off. There had not been any jobs that kept them away from the mansion that long before, so it was actually a bit emotional for Subaru.

"Subaru!"

"Oh, Petra—gh, whoa!"

Getting down from the carriage, Subaru thanked the driver as a girl in a maid outfit came running from the mansion and wrapped him in a flying hug. Struggling to catch her, he breathed a sigh of relief as he patted her on the head.

"Don't scare me like that, Petra. It's been a month, but I see you're in a good mood."

"It's been so long. I'm just really happy… I'm sure it was difficult for you, Master Subaru. I was worried after the letter came. You aren't just pretending to be okay when you're actually hurt, are you?"

"That tickles."

Petra's reddish-brown hair bobbed this way and that as she checked Subaru's body for injuries. Subaru grimaced a bit as everyone else left the carriage, too.

"Come on, Petra. It's time for work, before Ram gets mad at you."

"…Okaaay. Tell me everything later."

With that, Petra pulled away, but that look of suspicion never

left her eyes. She didn't seem to trust Subaru at all. To be fair, their original plan was to find some magic crystals, and instead they ended up fighting the Witch Cult in a massive battle that swept through the entire city.

Even if Subaru pleaded his innocence in the matter, it wasn't surprising that she refused to believe him. While he was thinking that, Petra greeted the guests with a practiced speech.

"Welcome, honored guests. I am a maid serving the Roswaal Manor, Petra Leyte. Please allow me to show you into the mansion after your long journey."

Julius was helping Anastasia down from the carriage, and they both looked impressed by the gracefulness of her introduction. Emilia and Beatrice looked almost proud of her.

"Well now, what a dignified little darling. I almost want to hire her myself."

"Indeed. It's almost like an entirely different person from the girl who leaped onto Subaru."

"…Apologies for that shameful display."

Petra's cheeks reddened as Anastasia and Julius smiled. Observing that reaction, Julius nodded.

"I see. I understand why people have taken to calling you the little girl tamer."

"Just to be clear, Petra isn't that young, and even if I let that misclassification slide, Beako is the only one, so don't get the wrong idea."

"Betty doesn't just listen to everything Subaru says. No one has tamed Betty." Subaru met Julius's banter with a biting response, only to be sharply corrected by Beatrice. "Besides, there's not even that much difference between Betty and Pet… Wait. P-Petra has grown a little, I suppose? And her hair's a bit longer, too…!"

"A full month has gone by, after all. I'm a growing girl. I'm getting taller, and if I don't cut my hair, of course it will get longer. But you're still this small."

"H-how could this be…?!"

Beatrice was trembling as Petra smiled and hugged her. Enjoying Beatrice's pouting face, Petra changed topics.

"I should show you in before Ms. Ram gets upset…"

"—If you wanted to avoid that, you should have tried a little harder."

"Eep!"

Petra's face paled when a familiar voice came from behind her. A second maid emerged from the mansion, making the younger maid shudder in fear—it was Ram.

Her pink eyes pinned Petra in place for several long moments before she slowly turned her gaze to Subaru and the others.

"Just when I was thinking your work had been improving and maybe you deserved some acknowledgment… How disappointing."

"I—I'm sorry… Um, but what was that about my work…?"

"Yes. I was going to say that you have gotten better at cooking and more careful with cleaning and better at washing the laundry, and you get up earlier than I do."

"Maybe you should take a look at your own work!"

How much could a veteran maid be outdone by a girl who had been a maid for barely a year? Even considering how fast Petra could pick up new things, if the bar was that low, clearing it didn't mean much.

Ram snorted at Subaru's outburst.

"What's the point of doubting oneself? I have nothing but self-confidence and the highest of expectations for myself."

"That is the one thing about you that I really, truly respect."

Subaru was astonished at how bluntly she announced that.

Emilia tapped Petra's frozen shoulder as she said, "Thanks for coming to meet us, Ram. Has anything happened in the manor while we were away?"

"There have been no issues. I am sure you all have much news to share. Did Garf and Otto die?"

"Don't go killing them off! What a thing to say with such a serious look on your face!"

"It's easy to see through a man with no composure. In your case, it's so clear that there's practically a hole and your insides are leaking out, so you should be careful. Being shallow and empty is just the worst."

"You're gonna seriously hurt my feelings, so could you stop? And besides, you got our letter, right?"

Ram shrugged as Subaru whispered to her.

They had sent a letter in advance of their departure from Pristella. If the contents had been shared with Ram, then she should know why they had come back to the manor.

Ram held up her finger.

"Relax. I heard the story from Master Roswaal. You have

business with the sleeping beauty and the mansion's jail. Though…" Ram's eyes narrowed mysteriously. "The preparations for both were Frederica's and Petra's jobs, not mine."

"Why do you look smug about that?"

Even after a month apart, Ram was the same as ever.

2

"Weeell, now. Welcome baaack. I'm glad for your safe retuuurn."

Roswaal greeted the group while sitting on the couch in the parlor.

Subaru and Emilia couldn't help glancing at each other when they saw his full-faced smile in clown makeup.

"…Emilia-tan, you didn't write anything strange in the letter, did you?"

"Um, I don't think so, but…maybe it's because you did something that made him happy? I mean, you and Roswaal do have those secret conversations from time to time…"

"Me? I'd rather spend my time and money on you and Beako and Petra and Frederica and Patlash and, I guess, Ram."

"That could be considered quite a lot of women's names, I suppose."

"It'd be embarrassing to show that sort of daily gratitude to Otto and Garfield, since they're fellow guys, okay?!" Beatrice looked exasperated as Subaru put his hand on her head and joined Emilia in confusion. Incidentally, the reason he didn't include Rem was to avoid upsetting the others, but he still regretted leaving her out. He quickly put that thought out of his mind to ask a pointed question. "So judging from that smile, you must be plotting some new nasty tricks. Am I right, Roswaal?"

"What a veeeexing reaction. All I've done is show how haaappy I am to see you are all safe and sound after worrying about your safety. You could hardly find any problem with that, yeees?"

Roswaal closed one eye, staring at Subaru with the blue eye.

"This past year, I've had seeeveral changes of heart. My cooperation is something to be celebrated as far as Lady Emilia is concerned, no?"

"Um, I guess so. Yes. Thank you, Roswaal."

Emilia accepted Roswaal's brazen appeal with her open-minded generosity. Seeing how Roswaal smiled and waved his hand

breezily, Subaru couldn't help wondering exactly how trustworthy this man really was.

"It's a waste of time trying to grasp what he is thinking. That oddness of his that makes him act the way he does is even more immeasurable than yours, Subaru."

"That was a bit vague."

Beatrice's ambiguous assessment almost made her sound like a rambling old lady. Taking her hand, he stepped into the parlor together with Emilia.

He was suspicious of Roswaal being in such a good mood. At the same time, it seemed like a safe bet that Roswaal was genuinely pleased to see them return. Having lost his tome of wisdom, they were crucial for achieving his goal.

"In that case, it would be helpful if you were a little bit more genuinely cooperative."

"You will accomplish what you set out to do with or without my aid. And because I have faith in your abilities, I am exerting myself in the arenas where your strength cannot reach. A truly fair relationship, wouldn't you saaay?"

"Yeah, it seriously gives that hint of RPG spice: a helper character who's not actually available to help most of the tiiime."

It was a standard trope of games that characters who were overpowered would only ever join the party for very specific fights.

As it so happened, Roswaal always watched from the sidelines as Subaru was pushed to the absolute limit so he could obtain proof that Subaru's ability to return by death could change fate itself.

He was a shrewd one and someone Subaru couldn't afford to let his guard down around. That assessment was still unchanged.

"Soooo, isn't it about time you introduced us?"

"Ah, sorry, sorry. Roswaal, we've brought some guests. Can you make some room?"

"So I've heeeard. Still, though, this is quite the intriiiiguing assembly."

Roswaal stood up and gestured for the guests standing at the entrance to the room to take a seat on the sofa while he shifted to a nearby armchair.

"Welcome. You've come a long way. We haven't been able to speak like this siiiince the ceremony."

"Indeed, and it's not like we got a chance to reeeally talk much there, either, so I suppose this marks the first time."

Anastasia smiled and met Roswaal's diplomatic greeting with an equally diplomatic response.

The ceremony they were referring to was the one held at the royal palace to honor Emilia, Crusch, Anastasia, and all their followers for their work in slaying the white whale.

It happened after the events in the Sanctuary, with representatives from all three factions present.

He's got some balls to show up for that with a straight face after everything he did.

Either way, this was the first time he and Anastasia had met face-to-face since then, and their greetings included a bit of probing. The conversation then shifted to the main topic: reporting what had occurred in Pristella.

"I've read your letter. Otto and Garfiel are recovering from their injuries, but even so, it sounds like the cost of dealing with the Witch Cult was fairly low?"

"Yes, thanks to the reeeally hard work the two of them put in… Actually, it's also thanks to everyone who was in the town. Subaru and Liliana, too."

"Why did you mention me and Liliana all of a sudden?"

Probably because they were in the non-combatant category. Not because they were particularly similar.

"Well, setting aside Subaru's self-consciousness… Lady Anastasia, it was you who invited Lady Emilia to Pristella. Do you have any thoughts regarding that?"

"I regret the incident. If you asked me to apologize, I'm prepared to offer a proper apology. However…"

"However, Lady Emilia has already refused anything more than that, I'm suuure."

"After all, it's the Witch Cult who were acting up, so they're the ones in the wrong. Anastasia doesn't have any responsibility for what they did. And we still managed to accomplish what we went there to do."

Emilia touched the pendant around her neck when Roswaal glanced at her. A gleaming magic crystal sat there, gathering strength for the great spirit that was still deep in slumber.

The reason they had gone to Pristella was to secure a magic crystal that could help Puck. As far as that specific goal was concerned, the trip to Pristella had been a success.

"Also, the fact that we happened to be there at the right time

might be why we were able to defeat the Witch Cult. If so, then that would be to Anastasia's credit—"

"That's obviously far beyond what I was considering, so just leave it at that."

Anastasia grimaced a bit at Emilia's forward-thinking perspective and stopped her.

"Really?"

For some reason, Anastasia looked relieved as Emilia cocked her head.

Of course, that whole line was just a preemptive push from Roswaal.

In fact, there was a decent chance the Witch Cult's attack on Pristella was primarily aimed at Emilia's faction. Roswaal was perfectly aware of that since it had been mentioned in the letter.

"The actions of the Witch Cult are their own. We can all agree that they're the worst and move on. The other factions have accepted that, and it's not as if there wasn't anything gained in the fighting, either."

"Killing one archbishop and capturing another. It is indeed a magnificent outcome. However, those cultists have no sense of working together or solidarity. Even if there is only one left, the danger remains unchanged."

"I can't argue with that…"

The Witch Cult was more a place for deviants to gather than any sort of formal organization. Because of that, it wasn't like Gluttony or Lust would stop their atrocities just because Greed and Wrath had been defeated.

"Anyway, we've got an idea that might take care of that."

"And that is why you are setting out for the Sage's watchtower. That is quite the perilous path. Do you have any reason to believe you will succeed?"

Roswaal was one of the leaders of the kingdom. It went without saying that he was aware that Reinhard had already attempted to cross the Auguria Dunes before only to fail.

Between the hallucinogenic miasma and the countless dangerous demon beasts, it was only natural to question how they would make it past those barriers. Subaru simply glanced at the trump card they had prepared for that issue.

"That is where I come in. Fortunately, I happen to know a secret path that will bring us to the Sage's watchtower. That is how

we can succeed."

"Even if you ask me to just trust yoooou… Something like a secret route through the dunes would surely fetch quite the price from any number of buyers. Why is it that you and you alone happen to be in possession of it?"

"I'm a merchant, so of course money is important. But there are some things money can't buy. And this here is one of those things. Can we agree on that?"

Anastasia, or rather Foxidna, was matching Roswaal point for point.

Despite the fact that she was a fake pretending to be Anastasia, her words possessed a mysterious strength, a strength that even overawed Subaru, who knew the truth.

Facing down the full force of Anastasia's gaze, Roswaal closed an eye.

"I see now how someone so young can run such a large company. It is quite a challenge to outplay someone so worldly with words alone. I imagine Lady Emilia has already agreed to your proposal?"

"I'm sorry for deciding something like this on my own."

"Not sorry enough to stop making such rash decisions without consulting others. But that is fine. You are one who chooses to take the thorny path. And that path is one he will surely resolve himself to follow as well."

Roswaal seemed unenthused by Anastasia's proposal, but that was where his interest lay in the end. If Emilia chose the most difficult path, then the hurdles Subaru would have to clear would naturally be even higher. For Roswaal, that was the hope that had replaced his tome of wisdom.

"Basically, we'll clear the whatever-it's-called desert with Anastasia's guidance. That's our decision."

"The Auguria Dunes. Just learn the name already."

Julius interjected with a sigh as Subaru relied on his vague memory to make a bold statement. The knight was sitting beside Anastasia and had listened in silence thus far, but he turned his intellectual gaze on Roswaal.

"I imagine you might be quite concerned, Marquis Mathers. However, there are many people in the city of Pristella who are currently suffering physically and mentally from the depredations of the Witch Cult. I would ask that you please allow us to undertake

this task, that our actions here might lead to their being saved."

"What an elegant bearing. Considering you are not in my memories, I suppose you are one of those victims, yeees?"

"

Subaru, who was on the verge of exploding. It wasn't shocking that Subaru was on the verge of erupting in anger, but even Emilia and Beatrice were on edge.

Seeing that, Roswaal raised his hand as if in surrender.

"Veeeery well, I was in the wrong. I was simply pointing out that perspective also exists."

"You were just harassing him for the hell of it. Don't screw with us."

"From your attitude, it seems as if there is more than just a few days shared between the two of yooou."

Roswaal closed an eye, meeting Subaru's sharp gaze with his yellow eye. And then he licked his lips as if seeing straight through Subaru.

"Again, you are the oooonly one who remembers. Just like Rem."

"No clue why, though."

"That is proof you are special. You should take good caaaare of that. There are many who cannot have that no matter how much they want it."

The last part was murmured softly, just to himself, and didn't reach Subaru's ears. Beatrice alone had a thoughtful look in her eyes.

With that exchange, Subaru let out a heavy sigh.

"The rest is like we mentioned in the letter. The manor's prison and…"

"Rem. Quite the bold decision. Even though you aaaare so loath to bring her up."

"…There might be a way to wake her up. I'm gonna take my chances. It's only natural, right?"

"It's surprising to choose her as the first subject for that potential method. You like to pretend to be selfish, but you are actually terribly self-punishing. Is there not somewhere in your heart or some corner of your mind telling you that you have no right to be saved first?"

"

soon as possible. But that was different from Subaru Natsuki being saved.

In Pristella, there were lots of people other than Subaru experiencing the same sort of suffering. So why did he get to be first before all of them?

That sense of guilt had been causing him to hesitate until the very last moment, but—

"If that's what you mean, then I talked to Subaru about that already, so it isn't a problem."

"…That is even more surprising." Emilia spoke up in Subaru's stead when he fell silent. Roswaal looked dubiously at her as she puffed out her chest and then winked at her. "It's perhaps not for me to say this, but it would be rather inconvenient for you if Rem was to awaken, wouldn't it, Lady Emilia? No matter how you look at it, Subaru has quite strong feelings toward the girl. They might even rival his feelings for you…"

"Yes, that's probably true. I imagine if Rem wakes up, Subaru will spend all of his time with her for a while. He might even stop caring about me."

"No, that's not…"

Subaru could confidently say that wasn't true. There was no way his feelings toward Emilia would ever waver. But the fact that he cared for Rem a great deal was not a lie, either. And Emilia was right. If Rem woke up, he would undoubtedly devote a lot of time to her, making up for the year they had lost.

But even so, Emilia had told him it was okay.

"If Subaru pays a lot of attention to her, then I'll just have to work hard to make him look at me again. It would be a problem if Subaru disappeared, so no matter how cute Rem is or how special she is to him, I'll convince him to stay with me, too."

"E-Emilia-tan?!"

"That's my resolve and what I decided. No one will complain about Subaru getting saved. So it's okay. Let's wake Rem up."

Emilia put her weight behind Subaru's decision.

Subaru gasped, and his knees trembled a bit at what sounded a lot like a confession.

Emilia had said things that sounded affectionate any number of times before. But even then, they were all still in the realm of just a sort of soft attraction—

"Whether with me, with Rem, with Beatrice, with Petra and

Patlash, or Frederica and Ram, or even Otto and Garfiel! I want Subaru to be reeeally, reeeally happy."

"There was a land dragon and a couple guys mixed in there at the end."

Subaru couldn't help interjecting despite the mixture of embarrassment and certain other emotions he was feeling.

But Beatrice, who was sitting next to him, jabbed him in the side. Looking over, he noticed Beatrice had an indignant look on her face.

"After this long, Betty won't complain about how fickle you are… But always keep one hand open. That's Betty's special privilege."

"You are ridiculously adorable…"

"Naturally. Betty's cuteness rings out in every realm."

Subaru couldn't speak for the gods and goddesses who ruled the earth and the heavens, but it certainly echoed loudly in his heart.

With Emilia and Beatrice giving him their full support, Subaru could devote himself to waking up Rem without worry. There was no more doubt.

"Sorry for being so loved by everyone, Roswaal. Looks like we'll be taking Rem with us."

"I'm quite surprised by all of you…but do as you please. In the first place, I never intended to stop youuuu."

"Then what was the point of asking that question?!"

"Just making sure you understand what it is you are doing, out of an excess of thoughtfulness. I was aaalso rude to the nameless knight there."

All the way to the end, Roswaal refused to let up on his teasing banter.

However, Julius shook his head and looked toward Subaru and Anastasia.

"No, my name is Julius Juukulius. At the moment, Subaru may be the only person who remembers me, but I am a knight in the Kingdom of Lugunica's royal guard. I am not so immature that something like this would cause my heart to waver."

Saying that, he magnificently brushed off the nasty mage's terrible provocations.

"…You were a little bit shaky there, though."

"Whose side are you on? It feels almost like I was just stabbed in the back."

Subaru and Julius did have a quiet little exchange among themselves at the very end, though.

3

With the discussion over, they left the parlor.

"Well, I wonder if that makes me one of his little friends nooow? What do you think?"

"…Spare Betty such disgusting statements. It sounds almost like you mean it, which is a scary thought."

"I've never been so inconstant as to press matters in this body, thoooough."

"You've been a woman, too. I suppose that's enough for Betty to be on her guard."

Roswaal's smile deepened as Beatrice remained composed while playing with her hair. It was a habit she had picked up when she needed something to do with her hands. That or it was a sign she was getting annoyed.

"That habit of yours neeeever changes. But it seems as if your feelings have. I can't quite bring myself to so easily wag my tail for someone else the way you can. I'm jealous."

"Compared to you, who could never touch Mother despite your single-minded determination, Betty can actually hold Subaru's hand, which is a thousand times better. You won't get a rise out of Betty."

"Look at yooou. You've really grown quite resolute."

Roswaal was sitting while Beatrice stood across from him, putting them at eye level. Sparks started to fly, but suddenly, Roswaal's expression softened.

"He defeated an archbishop. That should be the second inside Subaru now."

"…There should be other candidates besides Subaru."

"But none of them were as close as he was or overlapped. Save the boring pretenses for someone else."

"—Betty won't let him do any more than this."

There was a quiet resolve in her voice as she answered Roswaal.

"Betty belongs to Subaru, so Subaru will remain Subaru."

She glared at Roswaal as she said that and then turned to the door.

She had stayed behind to discuss things, but she decided she

should not speak any further than that.

"Beatrice."

Roswaal called out as she moved away.

She stopped but didn't turn around.

"I want you to be happy. You are like a little sister to me. I care deeply about you."

"…That's not the most appealing thought. And not as much as you care about Mother, I suppose."

"That's love after all, iiisn't it?"

Beatrice didn't respond.

The sound of the door opening and then closing was all that broke the silence.

After that, there was no more to say between Roswaal and Beatrice.

4

"Did your conversation with the master go well?"

"About the same as always. You can guess how it goes with him. I left Beako back there as someone who could speak freely with him, so I imagine he'll reflect a little bit on what he's done."

"I see. The master can't stand against Lady Beatrice after all."

Frederica covered her mouth with her hand and smiled elegantly.

After finishing the discussion with Roswaal in the parlor, she had taken over guiding Subaru and the others as they headed to the eastern wing of the manor. With that, Subaru had reunited with all three of the manor's maids.

The fierce-looking servant with beautiful, long blond hair and a neatly arranged maid outfit gave Anastasia and Julius a picture-perfect greeting before turning to Emilia.

"Was Garf of service to everyone during your trip? I gave him detailed instructions before leaving, but I couldn't help worrying that he might have caused you some trouble."

"You don't need to worry. Garfiel worked *reeeally* hard during the trip. He is behaving himself and recovering together with Otto right now…I think? At least I hope he is. I did ask him to rest up."

"I'm sorry that my foolish little brother has troubled you."

Emilia couldn't quite reassure Frederica, who apologized on behalf of her family.

Ultimately, even though Petra, Ram, Roswaal, and Frederica were concerned about Garfiel, there was no mistaking there had been some sort of change in his state of mind while he was in Pristella.

He had been hurt and used that as a springboard for further growth. If anything, it was the sort of development expected of a fifteen-year-old as far as Subaru was concerned.

"It did seem like Garfiel had a lot going on…"

"? Was there something you wanted to mention, Master Subaru?"

"No, nothing from me. Honestly, it's not really something I should be talking about myself."

Noticing Subaru's meaningful gaze, Frederica questioned him, but he just shrugged in response. Brushing off her question, he could imagine what might be going through Garfiel's mind.

There was a certain family that had caught Garfiel's attention in Pristella—especially a brother and sister with blond hair and green eyes that resembled Frederica and Garfiel.

The connection between them and Garfiel surely also applied to Frederica. But that was something for Garfiel to share with Frederica and Ryuzu, the members of his family.

"I won't say anything. Subaru Natsuki is just gonna walk away looking cool."

"Right, right, speaking of Garfiel, there were these children that he was getting along reeeally well with in Pristella. Those kids and __"

"Emilia-tan, don't make my monologue go to waste!"

Subaru frantically stopped Emilia before her natural airheadedness ruined his attempt to act smooth. Frederica looked suspicious, but Julius required her attention.

"Ms. Frederica, I regret interrupting your congenial conversation, but is that the place up ahead?"

"Yes, sir. The manor prison, as Master Subaru has called it."

"So the person in question is here, then? Hopefully the discussion will proceed well."

"It's a bit of a coin flip, I'd say. Honestly, if we manage to get anything even remotely useful, I'd call it a success."

Julius seemed to be ruminating on something as Subaru scratched his cheek and gave his best assessment of the situation.

Even though he had suggested it himself, Subaru wasn't really

expecting much since there was no telling whether the person they came to see would be willing to help.

"But she is pretty attached to you, so she should be willing to tell us a lot of things, right?" Emilia asked.

"There's no telling how much or how little that affection level will impact the conversation, though… Ah, we're here." As Subaru reined in Emilia's optimism, the procession reached its destination. Standing in front of the stairway leading underground, Anastasia furrowed her brow.

"Not exactly the most welcoming place I've ever seen." At a glance, it looked like any old average stairway leading to a basement, but Anastasia was as impressive as usual and noticed the subtle change in atmosphere. Foxes were canines, so maybe some smell tipped her off. Either way, the aura that hung in the air didn't actually have anything to do with smell. "Is it miasma? No, it seems different, but I can't say it's a pleasant feeling, either."

"That is the aura released by the person being kept in the room there. I will lead you in, so please watch your feet."

Frederica took the lead going down the dark staircase that Anastasia was peering into, and Subaru and the others quickly followed her underground.

Reaching the bottom, their footsteps rang louder on the stone flooring. The cool underground air chilled their lungs as Frederica unlocked the sturdy metal door at the end of the passage.

There was an almost palpable tension as the metal door creaked open—

"*Woof, woof!* I'm gonna eat youuu!"

"Kyaaah! Save me! Nooo!"

"Gah-ha-ha, plead all you want, but no one is coming to save you!"

A bright light shone from inside the room, and they could hear a high-pitched voice.

There was a single small figure inside the room, a girl with her back to the door. She had several stuffed animals arrayed around her and was playing with dolls in either hand.

She was doing different voices, playing all the various parts in her little story.

"No, I'm sure he'll come. The prince promi… Hmm?"

The girl shot up from her seat, gripping the little girl doll as she sensed something was off.

Then she slowly, nervously turned around and saw Subaru and everyone else standing at the entrance to the room. Her big, round eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. Her deep-blue hair hung down, and her simple, adorable face gradually reddened.

“H-hey. It’s been a while. How have you been doing?”

Subaru decided to act as if nothing happened and raised his hand to greet her. He glanced toward everyone else, trying to urge them not to say anything.

But—

“Oh, you’re so cute, Meili. I used to do the same sort of thing with snowmen…”

“Y-you big meanies! Argh! Whatever!”

Naturally, because Emilia didn’t get the message and immediately said what first came to mind, the little girl imploded.

5

“Come on, Meili. We said we’re sorry.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“I already said I wasn’t trying to be mean, right? C’mon, Meili.”

“Whatever.”

Meili was sitting in the middle of the room hugging one of her dolls and sulking, leaving Subaru and the others who had upset her standing there awkwardly.

Subaru wanted to talk with her, but it would be difficult as long as she remained resistant to any attempts to soothe her.

Julius asked, “Ms. Frederica, did you talk to her beforehand about us coming?”

“No, Master Subaru said it would be a long story so he would talk to her directly himself…”

“Subaru…”

“I didn’t mean for it to be like this! I thought it would be better this way is all! Agh, damn it. If it’s come to this, then…”

Subaru wouldn’t deny that his initial plan had come back to bite him, but he refused to take all the blame. He quickly decided to play his ultimate card. He had been working on it in the carriage ride back from Pristella—

“Look, Meili. I brought you a present from our trip, so can you please cheer up? It’s a new design, a droopy panda stuffed animal.”

“—! Waaah, so cute!”

Seeing the black-and-white stuffed animal Subaru was holding, Meili’s eyes suddenly lit up.

In the past year, Subaru had been helping out with various chores, and his sewing skills had gone up dramatically. He was finally able to make stuffed animals and women’s clothes. Meili’s clothes and all the stuffed animals and dolls she was playing with while locked up had all been handmade by Subaru.

“Phew, making me break out my secret weapon so quickly. Talk about a troublesome princess… What is it?”

“…No, I was just marveling at the depths of your preparation.”

“I think I’m probably more disturbed than anything. Beatrice, then Petra, and now this? You don’t have much of an excuse for this, do you, Natsuki?”

“You’ve got it wrong! I’m not gathering little girls because I want to!”

All of a sudden, the title of little girl tamer was starting to seem a bit too real, but Subaru wanted to assert that it was due to some sort of strange outside force that had nothing to do with him.

Either way, after acquiring the new stuffed animal—a panda that was droopy from the heat—Meili’s mood quickly improved. She was rubbing it against her cheek.

“Ummm, um, yeah! I’ve decided! I’m going to call this one giant bear cat!”

“So a straight-up translation of panda. That gets right to the nature of it, though.”

“…Oh, when did you come in, mister?”

Ignoring Subaru’s comments about her naming sense, Meili cocked her head quizzically. Apparently, she was willing to let bygones be bygones and pretend nothing had happened.

Subaru was perfectly happy to go along with it.

“? What do you mean, Meili? Why did you suddenly—?”

“Yeah, it’s been about a month, hasn’t it?! You weren’t lonely while we were away, were you?”

“Not really? It was Petra who was lonely without you around. You’re so bad, mister… Oh, new faces?”

When Subaru interrupted Emilia, who couldn’t read a room for her life, they narrowly avoided upsetting Meili again. Now mollified, the young girl was busy setting up her dolls on a shelf when she noticed Anastasia and Julius.

Anastasia’s expression softened as she watched how the girl changed so quickly.

“That’s fitting for a girl her age. Compared to Mimi, the way she leads people around is downright cute.”

“…That’s certainly one way to put it. We should be grateful to Mimi.” The lady and her retainer shared a moment of odd understanding. Meanwhile, Julius’s yellow eyes scanned the room. “Still, I imagined a harsher environment for something called a

prison… This is quite different from what I had pictured."

"She is a young girl, and it's not like we want to make her suffer…but we can't really just let her out, either, so it's complicated."

Emilia's eyes fell to the floor as she murmured regretfully.

As Julius indicated, the prison—the space where Meili was being kept—allowed her more freedom than even the most low-security jail.

It had originally been a simple stone room, but the walls had been painted bright colors, and there was a simple but comfortable carpet lining the floor. There wasn't much limiting her movements inside the room, and all the dolls Subaru had made for her were neatly lined up on a shelf. There were even books and toys to keep her entertained.

In other words, it was the sort of place a shut-in could live in peace and comfort. A part of Subaru would have loved to just hole up there himself.

"—But this unique atmosphere is emanating from her."

Julius scanned the room again, before looking at Meili specifically. She smiled at his observation. The sinister air that emanated from every pore of her body was the reason she was being held there.

"Like I mentioned in the carriage, this girl…Meili was originally an assassin of sorts who was trying to kill Emilia-tan and everyone else here. Make sense so far?"

"Can't say it does, but let's hear the rest."

"Feels like you're thinking of something else, but whatever. Anyway, she was an assassin. As for the method she used, put simply, she can control demon beasts."

"Yep, I get along really good with bad animals. Hee-hee."

Meili puffed out her chest in open pride, but it was a confession that would shock anyone who had not heard it before.

Demon beasts were not the sort of creatures that could be tamed by people. Arguably, most considered them inherently hostile. There were some notable exceptions where a demon beast would obey the one who broke their horns, but Meili was different.

"According to what Mama said, my demon control blessing fills the same role as their horn. So because of that, I get along really well with them."

The meaning of her claim wasn't exactly clear. There was no

evidence in this world of any research about demon beasts and their natural behavior. Of course, there were people who made a living hunting them, but hunters and researchers naturally had different perspectives.

"A little over a year ago, Meili and one other person attacked us as a team. We managed to stop them, and we've been holding her here ever since."

"Why would you do that? If she's an enemy, then you should put an end to things properly…"

"It ain't that simple. But also, from what she said, we were reluctant to just let her go, either."

"Mama will be mad at me. Elsa died, and I messed up, too, right? If she finds me, I'm sure she'll kill me. That's why staying here is the safest."

Meili was relaxed talking about her situation, but she had a clear grasp of the reality she was in. She had lost her partner and failed the job she had been given. The person who was managing them, most likely the handler of the assassins, would never forgive such a failure.

If she was set free, Meili would most likely end up being executed. She had made her own bed, but that outcome didn't sit well with Subaru and Emilia.

"It's not as if that sort of consideration is new for you or Lady Emilia. We are outsiders, so I won't comment on how you've decided to handle matters… But I must ask, who is this mother that she is talking about?"

"Unfortunately, other than that, she was called mother or mama; everything about her was a secret according to Meili. From what she said, they never even saw her real face… It all seems a little too thorough."

"That asshole Roswaal said when Elsa died, he couldn't reach his contact anymore…"

Frederica answered Julius's question while Subaru muttered to himself.

Roswaal was the one who hired Elsa to target Emilia and the rest of the people in the manor. That was the truth behind Emilia's faction's greatest scandal.

But from what Roswaal had said, he could no longer contact the person who had been the go-between for Elsa and Meili, so in the end, the true identity of that dangerous figure remained unknown

to this day.

"Anyway, that's Meili's position. We're not pampering any more than necessary…I think."

"That's *reeeally* like you to not have confidence on that point, Subaru."

"I mean, this is what happens when you prioritize conscience, right?!"

Imprisoning a young girl like Meili in a cold, dark dungeon would have been heartrending. If home arrest was enough of a punishment, then there was no need for anything more than that.

That was why Meili was just locked away in this basement.

"…That's an awfully lenient treatment for someone who tried to kill you. You sure you aren't just being taken advantage of?"

"I mean, there's such a thing as innocent malice. And a crime is a crime no matter how old the perpetrator, but…"

Subaru scratched his cheek as he thought.

Glancing at Meili, she was looking at him with her hard-to-read eyes. But he couldn't help feeling like it was simply the gaze of an uneasy little girl.

"If you give evil orders to someone without any ability to judge for themselves, that makes you the evil one. All the more so if you're using a child. What's the point in getting all twisted up and taking it out on the child?"

"That's a nice coat of whitewash. Do you think that will satisfy any of the people who have been killed by her already?"

"Not at all. And if anyone close to them wanted revenge on Meili, I wouldn't blame them. I also wouldn't be this forgiving if she had actually hurt anyone here."

In the end, Subaru's opinions and thoughts changed wildly depending on who he happened to meet.

If that meant people thinking he was contradictory or that he didn't stand for anything, then there was no helping it.

"When I was a kid, I had parents and other adults around who took responsibility for me when I couldn't. So I guess I'm okay with doing the same for a kid who I know and can get along with."

"…Thanks for the valuable opinion."

Anastasia ended the discussion, but she was more agreeing to disagree rather than convinced and accepting.

Of course, Subaru had not expected her to accept his perspective. If he wanted a fair and clean resolution, then Meili

would have to be judged as a hard-core criminal and sentenced fittingly.

But as far as Subaru was concerned, that seemed like a shitty solution.

"I…"

"Hmm?"

"I don't think what you are saying is that strange."

"…Thanks."

Even if he was resolved to have his belief denied, it was still a relief to hear Emilia say that.

Reflecting on how self-serving his beliefs were, Subaru turned back to Meili and met her eyes. The reason they had come there wasn't for a scenic tour of the Roswaal mansion's dungeon.

"I was wanting to ask you for some help with something. Do you think you can try to answer some questions for me?"

"…Sure. On account of Miss Giant Bear Cat, I'll go along with it."

She hugged the droopy panda while nodding. She was hiding her face behind the stuffed animal, not letting them see her reaction to the conversation they had been having, but this time no one commented on it.

6

"Are you really going to the dunes? Probably anyone other than me would die there…"

After hearing their story, Meili was playing with her hair as she responded.

It was awfully ironic for the little girl assassin who was completely lacking in morals to be looking at them as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"I've gone there before to get more demon beasts, but it really, really is overflowing with them, you know?"

"I'd love to get some advice from someone with experience, but more than enough people have already told us we'll die if we go there. Incidentally, we do have a guide who can get us through the desert."

"Right, that's my job."

Anastasia waved her hand.

However, just because they knew the path to the tower where

the Sage lived, that was only worth about thirty points toward actually clearing the problematic dunes—not enough to avoid red marks and a failing grade, which meant death on this practical exam.

There were three major problems. The desert of illusion, the demon beast dens, and the miasma.

The point of their trip down to the underground cell was to discuss the demon beast problem with Meili, who was an expert on the subject.

"Is there any way to conveniently draw out the demon beasts and round them all up at once?"

"Well, you could try running around all by yourself. I'm sure loooots of them will come for you."

"I've done that a few times before, and it's not exactly pleasant."

Subaru had used that exact method with some dogs and a whale last year. He was about ready to put that strategy to bed for good. If there was no other option, he could do it again, but he was hoping to avoid winding up alone in the treacherous desert.

"In which case, what if we just wiped out every last one that came to attack us?"

"If that's our chosen path, Lady Emilia and I would be responsible for fighting them, but…what do you think, Meili?"

Julius turned to Meili about the feasibility of Subaru's brute-force plan. Meili looked between him and Emilia a couple of times.

"Can you fight for about a week straight without drinking, eating, or sleeping?"

"That sounds a lot like late-war trench combat?!"

"O-okay, I'll try my best…!"

"No! It's impossible! You'll just make your beautiful hair and skin all dry and rough, so let's drop it! We're not doing it!"

Trying to force their way through was just not going to cut it as a strategy.

Part of Subaru wanted to believe it was just that Meili's memories of the Auguria Dunes were particularly bad, but he had also heard from Reinhard just how merciless the place could be, so he couldn't hide from reality.

And the resulting discussion with Meili didn't produce any developments, either—

"What about the barrier preventing demon beasts from

approaching Earlham village? Maybe we could do something with that?"

"That only works due to the magic the master has woven there. If you were hoping to pick it up and carry it with you, I'm afraid you should probably reconsider."

"Damn it. Maybe we should just all grab onto Roswaal and have him fly us in from the sky…"

As they kept shooting down each other's ideas, Subaru scratched his head in frustration.

There was a moment's silence—

"—Argh, I guess there's no other way."

"Huh?"

"I can go with you if you want."

Meili stood up, breaking the silence as she looked around at everyone else.

She touched her chest as she nodded.

"Right? If it's me, I can manage all the demon beasts one way or another. I'd just make them go away, tame them, make them kill each other, or even just have them eat this Sage person."

"Don't even think about doing that last one! Also…"

The extremeness of the statement was eye-widening, but even more than that, Subaru was surprised by the proposal. Both because Meili was willing to cooperate, but also because she was the one who suggested going outside herself.

"You were so against leaving the manor before…"

"It's not like Mama will find me the moment I set foot outside. I'm scared of her finding me, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life shut in like this, either."

It was surprising that Meili had given her situation enough thought that she realized she would someday have to go outside.

But Subaru quickly retracted that thought. Being closed off and isolated from everyone else meant having all the time in the world to think. He knew what kind of hell that could be.

"Subaru…"

Emilia tugged Subaru's sleeve as he felt an odd sympathy with Meili's resolve.

He knew what she wanted to say. He felt the same way.

"This isn't going to be a fun little trip outside, you know? It's sand and demon beasts and a Sage tower tour at the end."

"It's been a long time since I went for a walk. All the better if

things are exciting, right?"

She gave a real cocksure response, but Meili pulled it off with her usual insolent tone. There was no telling how much of that was a bluff and how much of it was real, but—

"In an unexpected twist, we've managed to recruit Meili as our demon beast advisor!"

"I should warn you now: You shouldn't get too ahead of yourself."

Subaru clenched his fist and cheered, but Meili sighed in exasperation and turned her attention to all of them—particularly to Emilia.

"It's dangerous to just immediately believe what people say. I might just be saying this in order to get an excuse to escape."

"There's certainly a chance of that, but it's not like we were forcing you to stay here in the first place."

Subaru could appreciate her warning, but if she ever said she wanted to leave, he had always planned to hear her out. So it was a little late for that warning.

"Right now, I'd rather you not, but if you ever decide you want to leave and live on your own, you're free to go. Just be careful not to be found by your scary mom."

"Do you mean I can just go die wherever once it's not going to cause you any problems?"

"Maybe back when I thought being cynical about everything was cool, but that's not what I think now." Subaru shook his head. He saw a bit of himself in Meili's jaded-beyond-her-years way of seeing things. Everyone goes through a phase where they mistake being different as being cool, but… "As far as I'm concerned, I want the people whose lives have crossed with mine to have a decent life and a decent death. You are free to leave if you want, but if you do, at least send us a letter. That's about all I ask."

Having said that, he thought about it again and realized it was a bit strange to assume she would just leave. They would need her strength going forward. Her life was going to have a new start going forward, too.

"…I wonder if that's how you tamed Beatrice and Petra. I really can't let my guard down around you at all."

"Huh? I feel like that sounded a bit worse than I would have liked."

Grimacing at the way the conversation had led back to a false

accusation against him, he looked to Emilia and the others for some support. But for some reason, Emilia and Frederica and even Anastasia looked away from him.

The only one who would meet his gaze was Julius, who was nodding in understanding.

"It's strange to say, but you really are quite skilled at wooing young girls… I can't say that skill is particularly respectable, though."

"It's because you guys say stuff like that that I keep getting treated like a little girl tamer! And to be clear, Meili isn't that small, either, so she doesn't count!" Stung by how genuinely amazed Julius seemed to be, Subaru stamped the ground and pointed at the entrance. As he did, someone happened to step through the door—

"—Betty thought it was noisy. I suppose Subaru is kicking up a fuss about something again?"

The youngest-looking girl had appeared after finishing up her secret conversation with Roswaal. A bit of a quarrel between her and the little girl tamer ensued, but that's a story for a different time.

7

With Meili agreeing to join the heart-racing Sage's tour, some might think that freeing her from captivity would spark controversy, but the reality was somewhat different.

"That's fine by meee? Lady Emilia has always had the right to decide how to deal with her. And in the one-in-a-million worst-case scenario, you'll be the one having to deal with the trouble, won't you, Subaruuu?"

The master of the mansion had no complaints, and Meili was formally freed from her confinement on the spot.

And though it was a bit of a strange position since she was going to be helping them, she was given her own room in the manor as well. As for what she would do after they finished their current journey, that was for her to think about.

At the very least, Subaru wanted her to have a place to come back to if she wanted one.

With that, they had taken care of half of the reasons they had stopped by the manor. All that was left was…

“Hey, Petra, isn’t it about time you cheered up?”

“It’s not like I’m especially mad. You are free to go to some far-off, dangerous place or whatever you like again, Master Subaru.”

Petra was huffy and red-faced as she went down the hall, leaving Subaru apologizing profusely to her back.

The person who was most against Subaru’s proposed heart-racing Sage tour was Petra. The reason she was angry was none other than Subaru’s terrible habit of breaking promises.

“I know I promised that I would take it easy for a little while after coming back from Pristella…but there isn’t time for that with what’s happened. Please understand. I’m sorry.”

“Whatever! You just don’t get it at all!”

As Subaru tried to apologize for going back on his word, Petra spun around and glared at him. He couldn’t help straightening up under her menacing gaze. As she looked up at him, she sighed slightly.

“You’re going someplace dangerous again, aren’t you?”

“I-it’s not guaranteed to be sketchy, you know? It’s not impossible that it’s just a nice, cheap, safe tour…”

“I worry. You always race out in front whenever it’s dangerous. It was really dangerous in Pristella, too. Mr. Otto and the others di…almost died.”

“Don’t go killing Otto again.”

Otto dies too much as it is.

Subaru understood why people had that general impression, but he would prefer it if Otto didn’t get himself killed off so easily. If he died, Subaru would have to reset. That said, he wasn’t about to declare they had a friendship that even death couldn’t sever.

“It doesn’t have to be you, does it? You could just leave it to someone else…someone stronger. Like, why not the master? He seems like he has plenty of free time.”

“I can understand your daily frustration with Roswaal, but let’s not actively look for excuses to kick him out of the house. I’m worried about the friction in our camp.”

Subaru could overlook Petra doing something like wringing out a rag in Roswaal’s tea, but anything more than that and he wouldn’t be able to stand idly by. Bombs had to be defused before they went off. That was the iron law in all games with affection meters.

“

worried her, so he didn't want to make a joke of it.

He didn't want to disrespect Petra with a half-assed evasion or a stalling tactic when she was being serious.

"I understand why you're worried. The desert we are going to is supposed to be crawling with demon beasts and is apparently the Guinness World Record holder for thickest miasma, too. And to top it off, I heard that this Sage isn't a people person and has been turning away visitors for some four hundred years running… But even so, I can't just let myself leave this to someone else."

"Why? You can't possibly believe you are actually strong, can you, Master Subaru? It's already more than enough for Mr. Garf to have such a shameful misunderstanding."

"Your grading curve is seriously ruthless! Don't let Garfiel hear you say that!"

Petra's marks were so strict that most guys would shudder if they ever heard how they rated.

Viewing the world through her lens, apparently only wisdom merited any respect, and there were practically no points awarded for strength. Petra was particularly hard to please since she wouldn't share what she considered most important for scoring.

"Well, setting Garfiel aside for now…it isn't as if I think there's no one better for this job than me. All things considered, the safest thing would be to just leave it all to Reinhard."

"So then why don't you do that?"

"—Probably because I want to be the first person she sees when she wakes up."

"

want to help her myself. I want to wake her up myself. With every fiber of my being, I want to be the one to save her.”

—That was why Subaru Natsuki was going.

Even though there were any number of stronger, wiser, better people.

Even if it was all just ego, Subaru Natsuki was going.

In order to save her. In order to be praised by her. For that reason alone.

“It’s selfish. And I’m sorry for always making you worry.”

“…This is the worst. It’s like nothing’s changed at all.”

“Hmm?”

Subaru had resolved himself to potentially be hated by Petra for that pathetic egotistical confession as he reached out to pat her head. But she just whispered something under her breath and looked up at him.

There were tears welling in her big eyes, which made Subaru waver for a moment.

The next moment—

“Eyy!”

“Isoflavone?!”

Petra’s head slammed straight into his solar plexus.

He made a strange noise at the sudden attack and struggled to breathe, dropping to his knees. Petra slipped out of his arms, pulled down her eyelid, and stuck out her tongue at him.

“You idiot, Master Subaru! You’re so selfish! Just do whatever you want!”

“P-Petra…”

“Go ahead and do all the dangerous things, make everyone worry, cause everyone around you trouble, and then just come back when it’s over like nothing happened, just like always! Hmph!”

“When you put it like that, I’m a pretty troublesome guy, aren’t I…?”

Standing up as he rubbed his chest, Subaru had a moment of self-reflection, unable to say anything in defense of himself after Petra’s tirade.

In the end, he had failed to make her feel better. She, on the other hand, had come to terms with her own feelings and was ready to see Subaru off like always.

Subaru scratched his head pathetically at having to rely on everyone around him again.

“Got it. In that case, I’m sorry for always doing this, but I’m gonna just run headlong toward danger again, and I’ll be back after screwing things up here and there in all sorts of ways, so wait for me. Being the first person to welcome me back after I leave is your special privilege.”

“…You won’t let Ms. Frederica or Ms. Ram say it before me?”

“Yeah, I promise.”

“Not the master, either?”

“I’d beat myself senseless if he was the first person I saw when I came back here.”

“…Mm, very well. Then I’ll accept that.”

She had seemingly been convinced, and after taking a long, deep breath, Petra reconciled with Subaru over that promise.

Even with his propensity to go back on his word, Subaru swore in his heart that was one promise he would keep.

“You are so hopeless, Master Subaru…”

Subaru scratched his cheek as Petra muttered that.

It sort of felt like he was hearing that from everyone he showed his face to.

He couldn’t help but wonder how he would ever make it up to them.

Whenever he entered that room, he instinctively started holding his breath and walking softly.

Even if he entered the room singing in a loud voice and tap-dancing, it wouldn't have changed the reaction in the room. But he couldn't help but subconsciously respect the silence, probably because the girl sleeping on the bed in that room seemed so frail that he hesitated to even touch her.

"I'm getting too poetic for my own good."

He felt exasperated with himself as he drew a chair next to the bed and sat down.

It had been a month since the last time he had visited, but there was no change—not in a month, and not in a year.

Taking Rem's hand as she slept, he squeezed it gently and started to talk.

"Sorry for coming here only after everything else. There were a few problems to take care of first… No, sorry, I'm just making excuses."

"

last—

“—We might finally be able to reach it.”

“

lust after my twin makes me feel worried about my own safety."

"How little do you trust me? We've known each other pretty damn long now, haven't we?"

"Hah."

Subaru let go of Rem's hand, and Ram stole his place. She gently held her little sister's hand and her light-pink eyes softened as she looked at Rem's tranquil sleeping face.

"I came to change Rem's clothes in preparation for her departure. She doesn't sweat, so I'm sure she doesn't need it, but I want to clean her body first."

"

“There’s no denying she’s capable, though I can’t remember her being particularly graceful. She was surprisingly careless and tended to rush into things. There were times she made assumptions and sort of went on a rampage, too. More than a few, in fact.”

Subaru recalled how he had died not once but twice because of that tendency to jump to conclusions.

“You don’t say,” Ram responded listlessly. “Talking about lost memories is all too retrospective. I’m not much of a fan of it.”

“Oh yeah? If you say so.”

“…If she wakes up and I can remember, then we can talk about the past all we want. And even if I don’t remember, we can still just talk as long as she wakes up.”

Ram’s expression was unchanged as she looked into the face of her sleeping sister and gently ran her fingers through her hair. Rem’s hair dropped gently over her pale forehead. Seeing that, Ram’s eyelashes quivered.

In that moment, Subaru thought Ram looked more beautiful than ever.

Even if she didn’t remember, even if her memories were gone, there was no way that their bond as sisters would disappear.

And even if it did, there was no reason they couldn’t rebuild it.

“—Leave it to me. I’ll clear the way to the Pleiades Watchtower for sure and come back with good news and a Rem who has woken up. Then you sisters can have your emotional reunion.”

Subaru said it in a deliberately loud and stupidly cheerful voice.

Quiet moods and depressed moments didn’t suit the relationship that Subaru and Ram had.

“What are you saying, Barusu?”

“Huh?”

But despite his intentions, Ram cocked her head sneeringly. She maintained that pose and gaze as she continued:

“I’m going with you. Whatever emotional reunion there is, I’ll do it on my own. Don’t patronize me.”

“Why is this the first time I’m hearing of it?!”

Subaru’s eyes widened as Ram snorted in her usual manner.

But even if Subaru was surprised, and even if he pressed her on it, there was no indication in the slightest that Ram would change her mind.

With both Ram and Rem coming along, the heart-racing Sage

tour had turned into a bigger family affair than expected. A difficult road lay ahead.

9

In the end, eight people would be departing on this journey.

Of course, they were all necessary for one reason or another, and they all had their roles to fill, but Subaru had never been on a long journey with such a large group.

"Is this really gonna be okay…?"

"What is it, Subaru? Is there something bothering you?"

Seeing Subaru twisting his head and worrying about the future, Emilia came to check up on him. She was wearing light clothes for the trip.

"Hmm. That outfit is really cute on you, Emilia-tan… And I have a lot of things I'm worried about. I mean, to start with, where we're going is dangerous, right? So with such a large group, will we really be able to protect everyone?"

"Mm, that's a good point. Ram and Rem are coming with us this time, plus Meili. We're going to have to be sure to protect them and Anastasia and you, too."

"What?! Did you just throw me onto the 'needs protection' side of the equation?!"

When it came to fighting ability, Subaru and Beatrice together were on about even ground with Ram. If it came to a serious fight, Emilia and Julius would be the ones doing the heavy lifting. As an adolescent boy, it hurt Subaru's pride to simply rely on either of them for protection.

At present, there was a carriage parked in front of Roswaal Manor, and they were preparing to depart. The large carriage they had gotten for the journey had more than enough space to hold ten people without being too crowded. Visually, it looked almost like a camper car, though it relied on land dragons for propulsion like most other carriages. And one of the dragons pulling it was Subaru's trusty companion, Patlash.

I'd love to say there's nothing to worry about as long as I have Patlash with me, but—

"Your whole schtick is getting along with demon beasts, so why can't you get along with a land dragon?"

"Don't be so mean, mister."

Meili's cheeks puffed out indignantly.

She had changed out of her detention clothes, but she didn't have much baggage. As she tried to load that little bit of luggage onto the carriage, she had gotten into a bit of a quarrel with Patlash.

She was unconditionally loved by demon beasts, but apparently land dragons took an exception to her. It wasn't just Patlash. Even the other land dragons were growling at her.

"They all seem to hate the smell of the demon beasts on me. That's why they're angry."

"Ah, I see, that's why… Patlash, she's okay."

Hearing that, Subaru brushed Patlash's neck and explained the situation. The proud dragon buried her nose in Subaru's neck and blatantly sniffed him. If he had to guess, he'd say she was trying to overwrite Meili's smell with his.

"Patlash is usually so considerate. For her to be this obviously hostile… You two really don't get along…"

"The others aside, it's definitely impossible for me to make nice with that dragon. She's too attached to you. Don't leave me alone with her. She might eat me."

"As if that would ever happen! My Patlash is a vegetarian!"

Soothing his trusty dragon, who had gotten a little bit excited, Subaru pushed Meili onto the carriage.

And just when he was wiping the sweat from his brow at one job done…

"I know you're busy currying favor with girls, but could I borrow you for a moooment?"

"Please can you stop with the scandalous-sounding descriptions? You're making me sound like I'm stupidly predictable or something."

Responding to that malicious question, Subaru turned to see Roswaal smiling and waving.

Emilia and Julius were standing next to the marquis in his jester-like outfit. Subaru headed over while thinking to himself what a strange pairing the three of them were. When he arrived, Roswaal winked at the three of them.

"Now then, regarding this trip, it's going to be quite the journey and will likely be quiiite difficult. So there is one favor I wanted to ask you for duuuring the travels—regarding Ram."

"…Marquis Mathers, is it appropriate for me to be here for this

conversation?”

Subaru and Emilia fell silent, but Julius furrowed his narrow brow. He was going to be joining them on the journey, but he was technically an outsider and not a part of Emilia’s faction, so he naturally wondered why he was being included in this conversation.

“I am not idly making trouble. After watching the way you carry yourself here at the manor and the way you have interacted with Subaru and the others, I’ve judged that you can be trusted. And because of that, I have a request. What do you saaay, Julius?”

“That’s the shadiest thing you’ve said in a while, Roswaal.”

“Sorry, but I was thinking the same thing…”

Roswaal’s response instead caused Subaru and Emilia to start being suspicious.

Even setting aside past experiences, that was a statement that was strange coming from Roswaal. He seemed to realize that himself because he smiled wryly.

“Sorry. It’s understandable if it sounds unconviiincing. But nonetheless, there is something I would like to ask Julius, since it is a matter of life and death.”

“Life and… Is it related to Ms. Ram’s constitution?”

“Deeear me. To think you noticed… You are even more skilled than I had thooought.”

Roswaal was impressed that Julius had grasped the crux of the problem before he even explained it. The marquis nodded and traced a picture of sorts in the air with his finger.

“If you’ve noticed, then that makes things simpler. Ram’s body cannot fully contain her overflowing talent. Because of that, her body is always straining under the weight of it. Languor and pain are her constant companions…though she does not show it because she is by nature a brave and stout-hearted giiirl.”

“What? There’s no way…”

“It is not surprising you would be surprised, Lady Emilia. Because that girl is far too strong.”

Emilia gasped as Roswaal slowly shook his head.

Subaru was just as surprised as Emilia. He had heard that Ram had lost her horn and her previous strength. Rem had said that Ram’s strength was unheard of even among the Oni tribe.

But he hadn’t known that losing her horn was still tormenting her to this day.

“—I see; I understand what you had in mind then.”

Julius nodded as if he understood everything just from hearing that. Roswaal raised an eyebrow while Subaru and Emilia looked at each other.

We just got confirmation about what's happening to Ram's body. What could you possibly figure out from just that?

"The poor condition of her body is clear. If a defective gate is undermining her health, then something needs to serve as its replacement. Most likely you have been personally handling that so far, have you not, Marquis Mathers?"

"Correct, Julius. It really is a shame that I cannot remember yooou."

"…Ohh! So that's what it is."

While Roswaal admired Julius's insight, Emilia put her fist in her palm, finally understanding as well.

While the three of them were all getting on the same page, Subaru still couldn't keep up with his basic level of knowledge and started to look irritated.

"Hey, don't go finding enlightenment all at once and then stop there. So what is it?"

"It's simple, Subaru. Ms. Ram's body is suffering from a similar sort of deficiency as you are. Just as Lady Beatrice does for you, Ms. Ram needs someone to regulate her mana."

"Every night, I secretly regulate it fooor her."

"Oh, every night… Ah!"

From their explanation, something clicked in the back of Subaru's head.

He remembered the image of Ram going to Roswaal every night. To be honest, at first, he had assumed it was a secret tryst between master and maid and averted his eyes from the graphic images that thought evoked. Now he realized it was in a certain sense a type of treatment for Ram.

"My deepest apologies, Marquis Mathers. I'm afraid I will be unable to meet your expectations."

While Subaru's face was getting hot as he realized he had been misunderstanding things for over a year now, Julius shared his thoughts on the matter. Roswaal's eyes narrowed at the unexpected response.

"It does not appear you are merely being humble nor are you simply trying to avoid rendering aid to a rival faction. Managing Ram's Odo demands an aptitude at manipulating multiple colors of

magic. On that point, I thought that you would be the best fit…"

"I suspect your hope is due to the children around me."

Julius's lips softened, like he had been caught in a moment of weakness.

For a brief moment, several faint, warm lights floated around him. Six colors shimmered in the air. These were the spirits Julius had contracted with. That he used to be contracted with.

"My sprouts… However, our connection is no more. If I had retained my previous status, I wouldn't have hesitated to accept your request, but…"

"Your contract with the spirits ended when your name was stolen, yes? And yet, despite having lost that connection, they still don't seem to want to leave your siiide."

"I suspect it's due to the remnants of the bond we once had. Otherwise, the connection is still there even if they cannot perceive it. Either way, though, it is merely their mercy that keeps them by my side. I'm afraid I cannot be of much help with my strength alone."

Looking at the quasi-spirits, Julius sighed listlessly.

"Right now, I can do no more than serve as a simple knight. My apologies."

"I seeee. That is unfortunate. Disappointing that it turned out like this, but…"

"It's okay. I'll do my best to cover for what Julius can't do."

Emilia stepped forward and put her hand firmly against her chest as Julius fell silent. Her purple eyes were welling with determination, if not exactly self-confidence. That willingness to step forward and do whatever she could was one of her greatest weapons.

"Roswaal, leave it to me. I'll do my best if it's for Ram's sake."

"Yes, of course. If I can't borrow Julius's strength, then there is no choice but to entrust Ram's fate to you, Lady Emilia. You can speak with Ram herself and Beatrice about the details."

"Ram aside, what do you mean, Beako?"

"When it comes to the theory and practical application of magic, Beatrice is quiiite skilled. It's a waste of her talents to be contracted with you, but in terms of knowledge, she is comparable even to meee."

"Sorry to be wasting her talent, but at least I make up for it with love."

It wasn't really a counterargument, but Subaru still emphasized his love for Beatrice. He'd make her his background on his phone and his PC without hesitation. Of course, that analogy wouldn't make much sense in this world.

Either way, Roswaal's request turned out to be surprisingly straightforward and genuine.

If it was for Ram's sake, then Emilia would do everything she could, and Subaru would talk to Beatrice about it, too.

"Still, I'm shocked you made such a heartfelt request. You feeling okay?"

"It's quite admirable. This is the first time Ram has ever said she would leave my side."

"

with a result that lives up to your expectations."

"I have high expectations for you. But dooon't push yourself recklessly. And watch out for Lady Emilia and Subaru's recklessness as well. Supervising them is aaalso your role."

"Yes, Master."

Subaru was about to say something snarky, but he was silenced by Ram's razor-sharp gaze. After buckling, Subaru turned his attention to the person next to Ram.

Rem was dressed in clothes for going out and was being pushed by Petra in a wheelchair—something that Subaru had re-created using his memories from his original world.

The Roswaal Manor was quite near Castour, the famed industrial hub of Lugunica. Using the skills of their craftsmen, Subaru was able to create yet another product of his otherworldly knowledge.

"The maintenance is gonna be tricky on such a long journey, but I'll take care of it."

"You are quite handy, Master Subaru, and the craftsmen indicated it should be sturdy so long as it is not handled recklessly. However, take care in sand."

"Please be careful, Su…Master Subaru. Please take care of Rem."

With Frederica's seal of approval, Petra let Subaru take control of the wheelchair. Moving around behind Rem, he confirmed there was no problem moving over flat ground.

"Okay, feels fine. Frederica, Petra, you two hold down the fort while we're gone."

"Leave the master to us."

"Mr. Otto and Mr. Garf, too."

Frederica and Petra nodded as Subaru double-checked the wheelchair.

This time, the trip was estimated to take about two months at a minimum, so most likely Otto would recover in Pristella and make his way back to the manor before they returned.

Trusting the two of them to hold down the fort until then, Subaru pushed the wheelchair toward the carriage.

"All right. I'm reluctant to go, but I guess it's about time."

"—Barusu."

Suddenly, Ram's voice hit Subaru in the back of the head.

"Huh? What is it? Something bothering you?"

“No, not that… Figure it out.”

“Figure it out…?”

He furrowed his brow at that, and then he realized that her gaze was focused on his hands. In other words, at Rem’s wheelchair.

“If you want to switch with me, then just say so.”

“Considering what it means that I’m coming with you and what that means about my goal, it should be obvious that you should yield that to me… Though you figured it out without needing me to say it, which I guess should be considered a small mark in your favor.”

Subaru reluctantly let Ram take his place, and she pushed the wheelchair in his stead. She moved slowly toward the carriage as if nursing her sister, who was sleeping in the chair.

Watching the two of them, he suddenly felt someone grasp his newly freed hand.

“Beako?”

“You don’t have to look so pathetic. It’s not as if your feelings lose out to how her older sister feels. I suppose you should just do what you can in your own way.”

“I’m not depressed about th… No, I guess maybe I am.”

Subaru had not expected that it would feel like his role had been stripped away, but he couldn’t help it. Subaru pinched his cheek and pulled hard with his free hand.

After he did that, his free hand was stolen by another pale hand.

“If that’s what you’re doing with your other hand, then I’ll be taking it.”

“Urgh. Emilia-tan…”

“Betty wonders what you’ll do when she wakes up, since you run out of hands so easily already.”

“Ah, I’m curious about that, too.”

With Beatrice and Emilia on either side, Subaru looked at the two of them, no idea how he should respond. But a little bit of a glare and a pleasant glance were all that he got from the two of them.

And to top it off, he could feel Petra’s eyes staring holes in his back and Ram’s icy, disdainful gaze when she turned around after reaching the carriage.

Forsaken and surrounded on all sides, Subaru’s expression

tensed. And of all things, Julius was nodding to himself while watching.

“What’s with that reaction? If you’ve got something to say, then say it!”

“I see. In that case, allow me one comment—surrounded by such beautiful women, you are truly blessed. But I cannot help but wonder whether your two hands are enough to satisfy all these beauties.”

“What?! Is everyone just out to get me?! Did I do something wrong?!”

Julius shrugged with a sorrowful countenance as Subaru’s pathetic shout echoed in the air. Unfortunately, there was no war councilor or internal counsel there to back Subaru up.

For the next two months on the road, he would just have to do his best fighting on his own.

Realizing the hopelessness of his situation, affection and trust welled up inside Subaru as he felt the warmth filling his two hands, which was only matched by a swelling unease.

And that was how the morning of departure passed.

CHAPTER 2

OVERCOME SAND TIME!

1

It was a twenty-day haul from the manor to the Auguria Dunes.

The trip had begun with one uneasy morning, but fortunately, there had not been any noteworthy incidents along the way, granting the party a period of peace.

They were heading east in a straight line following the road, passing time in luxurious boredom.

“I had the same thought when we were coming back from Pristella and on the Liphas plains, too, but…the roads seem pretty safe here in Lugunica.”

“The maintenance and safety of the roads play an important role in keeping the peace of the country. Compared to other countries, Lugunica is particularly dedicated. Attacks by bandits and demon beasts are significantly lower as a result.”

“Huh, does that mean other countries aren’t this safe?”

“The Holy Kingdom of Gusteko struggles to maintain their roads since it is covered in perpetual snow. The Volakian Empire and Kararagi Federation are home to many races in their countries, leading to a wide variety of different customs. With such stark differences, clashes are more common. So to answer your question, no, other countries aren’t this safe.”

“You don’t say.”

Subaru and Julius were chatting on the driver’s bench of the carriage as a gentle breeze blew past.

The big carriage was drawn by two land dragons. Subaru was holding the reins while Julius sat beside him and watched their surroundings. They had settled on this arrangement because if

everyone was inside the carriage, it would leave them slow to react if something happened, but as the idle conversation suggested, the road so far had been peaceful.

“Yaaawn.”

“—Subaru.”

Subaru yawned at the unchanging landscape and boredom, but he was immediately met with a sharp voice from Julius.

“Yeah, yeah.” Subaru waved his hand.

“I can understand it is difficult to maintain a high level of focus, but allowing an opening such as that is the most dangerous thing you can do. I won’t say don’t let your guard down at all, but at least don’t do it in such an obvious way that anyone can tell.”

“It was a single yawn. I’m sure you’ve yawned before once in your life, haven’t you?”

“Of course. I experience the same physiological phenomena as anyone else. But a knight should possess the state of mind and wherewithal to avoid showing them in front of others. You are still lacking in self-awareness.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s me, the oblivious knight, at your service.”

Julius was as prickly as ever, but Subaru was becoming a master at fending off his jabs.

Between the trip from Pristella and their current journey, he had spent over twenty days on the road with Julius. Subaru had learned how to get along with him.

“I would also say it is proper manners to look at the person you are speaking to when you are having a serious conversation.”

“If someone won’t seriously listen to your serious conversation, that means they don’t think it’s the right time to be having that conversation, right? You should loosen up a little. You’re too tense. Yawn a little or something.”

“

carriage were having. Which would suggest that they couldn't hear Subaru and Julius, either.

They were both men, and their relationship was complicated in more ways than one, but for the moment they were comrades who needed to work together.

Subaru shifted gears, deciding that they should talk a little bit more openly.

"It came up during that chat with Roswaal, but what happened with your spirits?"

"…There's been no change. They're still at my side, but they won't touch down on my arm to rest their wings. They seem to be perplexed as well."

Julius made the spirits visible when Subaru brought them up.

The faint glimmer of six colors was still following Julius. But they didn't sit on his outstretched arm and were flitting around seemingly in confusion.

"My blessing seems to still be working as before. That is probably part of what is troubling them. They don't seem to be able to understand why it is so hard to leave me."

"Forming another contract…would be difficult since it isn't like the original one was broken, huh? I know it's not really my place to speak, but would it be possible to make a deal with another spirit until this is all resolved?"

"It's a rare talent to be able to borrow strength from passing lesser spirits like Lady Emilia does. The only ones I can draw strength from are those who I have known for years. It's similar to how you and Lady Beatrice operate."

"Emilia-tan and Puck are like that, too. I guess it makes sense that your partners are special."

Scratching his head, Subaru found himself thinking that he had made an unreasonable suggestion.

As a fellow spirit user, he wouldn't have wanted someone telling him to search for another spirit. If his bond with Beatrice was severed, would he just let her go? That was basically what he had asked Julius to consider.

"Because of that, I can only fulfill my duty as a knight with this sword of mine. Of course, I have trained my sword no less than my spirit magic, but it is still true that it marks a significant drop in my individual strength."

"When you say your sword alone isn't strong enough, it just

comes off as sarcasm to me."

Subaru being completely dominated by that sword alone was the starting point of their relationship. At the time, Subaru might as well have been a baby trying to fight against him. *By now I should at least be at the level of a five-year-old, though, right?*

"It's the same with Reinhard, but you guys have a bad habit of underrating yourselves. There's such a thing as being too modest. In fact, that's something that applies to a lot of settings, if you ask me."

"I'm tempted to say much the same thing to you, but I'm not so sure—setting you and myself aside, what Reinhard does is different from modesty or underrating himself."

"How so…?"

Subaru cocked his head in confusion as he imagined the red-haired hero.

Anyone looking at him would see he was superhuman, the strongest, and completely peerless. That was Reinhard van Astrea, so it was surprising that there would be a difference in how Julius and he evaluated Reinhard.

"Please don't misunderstand me. I am in complete agreement regarding the high level of Reinhard's strength. Indeed, I suspect on that point every person who knows him would be in full agreement. He is arguably the pinnacle of humanity."

"It's shocking enough that I can't really call that an exaggeration."

"It's not just his strength, either. His way of life and self-consciousness are also fully realized. When I first met him, he was not even ten years old, but he hasn't changed at all since then."

"Wait, he was like that even back then?"

It was a bit of a philosophical question to ask when did Reinhard become Reinhard, but according to Julius, who had known him more than a decade ago, he was already completely developed by that point.

The boy not even ten years old who lost his grandmother, inherited her blessing, and became the Sword Saint—

"I wonder what it must have felt like."

"Hmm?"

"Fifteen years ago, Reinhard was about five years old, right? Inheriting his grandmother's blessing at that age, growing up in a family that inherited the blood of a legendary hero…just what sort

of responsibility must he have been saddled with."

Subaru felt like he could understand the weight of a parent's expectations a little bit.

Of course, the weight that he had borne, and the one Reinhard carried and the responsibilities it implied, were not remotely comparable, and it was maybe even rude to try to compare them, but still.

"Honestly, I'm weak. I'm weak and don't have nearly enough strength, so I'm always regretting things. There's probably not a single night I haven't wished to be strong enough to not be so helpless."

"That sounds like you've endured quite a number of fruitless nights."

"Who asked you? …Anyway, it just feels like Reinhard's in the exact opposite situation. I don't think he was always the Reinhard we knew from age five, so what must he have felt?"

"…I cannot begin to say what he might have been feeling at the time. However…"

Julius paused and looked up.

His expression softened as he stared down the road they were traveling. Maybe it was more accurate to say he was looking at the sky in the distance and the sunlight shining down on them.

"…seeing Reinhard then was a major turning point for me."

His voice sounded almost proud.

It was almost as if he was squinting his eyes not from the sun, but from the dazzling object of aspiration that had been burned into his memories as a child and was still fresh even now.

"

“Don’t go reading people’s minds. It’s scary.”

“Hah. It’s because I’ve been traveling with you for a while now. I’ve started to get a sense for it, I guess.”

Julius brushed back his hair, seeming somehow pleased with himself. Subaru could only sigh.

I guess we’ve both gotten better at dealing with each other.

“At this rate, if nothing else happens, I’ll be able to write a dissertation on you.”

“Don’t worry. At the moment, you’re already the person who knows me best in the world second only to myself.”

“That wasn’t a title I ever particularly wanted, but there you have it! I’ve got my PhD in Juliusology. If Joshua heard that…”

Subaru trailed off as he started to make a joke.

“

tourists, either.

The sign declaring it the easternmost town in the world didn't really have a purpose to serve in the end, and there wasn't anything to see but a desolate townscape.

"…Visitors? …In the middle of a sandstorm? Welcome in."

Pushing open the door and entering the shop, they were greeted by the owner at the bar polishing glasses. It wasn't a particularly welcoming tone, but that wasn't too shocking.

If a bunch of sandy guests happened to stop in in the middle of the sand time, it was only natural to be a little bit bitter.

"

business during the sand time?"

Sliding the hood he was wearing off his head, Subaru looked around the empty tavern. The gruff owner grunted in response as he set down the ordered milk.

The cold one was Subaru's order, and the warm was Emilia's.

"It's not like anyone from the outside ever comes here. Opening this place during the day, and during the sand time at that, is basically just a hobby of mine. Not like I expected to actually get any customers."

"I see. So then, since we're outsiders *and* customers, that makes us VIPs, right?"

"And then you had to go and order milk at a tavern. Here you go, little lady."

"Ooh, thank you."

Emilia took the warmed milk and held the mug in her hands for a moment. Subaru glanced at her blowing on the milk to cool it a bit as the owner glared over the counter at him.

"So? What are you two doing all the way out in Mirula during the sand time?"

"Thanks for asking. The guy at the inn tried to stop us, but I wanted to test the sand time, as sort of a trial run. The real deal won't be anything compared to this after all, right?"

"The real deal, huh? And that would be…"

"Obviously crossing the Auguria Dunes."

The owner fell silent as Subaru held up his finger and declared that confidently. Then he slowly looked back and forth between the two of them and rubbed his forehead.

"I don't know what sort of joke you're playing at, but if you're thinking of going out there like it's some sort of fun escapade, then you should turn back now. You're only gonna get yourselves killed."

"Whoa, whoa, what are you talking about? Do we look like we're here messing around? You say something, too, Emilia-tan."

"Haah, haaah, hot…eh? What? Sorry, I wasn't listening."

"See, isn't that seriously E M T?"

"I'm tellin' you this for your own good. Go home now before you wind up dead."

The owner's trust dropped even more after watching their exchange.

But there was no denying he wasn't saying it maliciously. They knew the danger of the Auguria Dunes already from previous

reviews, but—

“We don’t really have a choice to turn back, unfortunately. Since forward’s our only path, we want to at least choose the safest possible way forward we can. You can understand that, right?”

“You’re the ones who don’t understand. You listening? There’s nothing that can be done for those dunes. They’re swarming with demon beasts and overflowing with the witch’s miasma, and no matter what you do, it’s impossible to ever get any closer to that tower in the distance.”

Getting annoyed at Subaru’s casual attitude, the owner explained in detail the menace of the dunes. Pointing out the window that was closed against the sandstorm, his lips curled.

“There’s no end to reckless fools like you. But there’s no one who’s reached the Sage’s tower in the middle of that sea of sand. If you’re lucky, you’ll make it back alive, but most of them are still out there buried in the sand.”

“

pretty dubious in the first place."

The owner shrugged and shook his head in disgust.

He was probably telling the truth about having seen dozens of people recklessly try to reach the Pleiades Watchtower. He was a nicer guy than his face let on probably, because he seemed embarrassed over how he reacted.

"Do you mean even if we reach the tower, we might not be able to meet the Sage?"

"I've never heard anything about anyone reaching it. And if you believe the rumor, the Sage is still at the top of the tower looking out over the dunes, delivering a righteous judgment upon all villains, but…there's also demon beasts and the miasma. I can't imagine those dunes are anything other than a trap for hunting prey."

"A lure for hunting prey…"

Emilia gasped slightly. The owner nodded and then turned toward the window.

"Don't move around outside during the sand time and avoid demon beasts as much as possible. But even then, you still can't avoid the miasma. The biggest obstacle for clearing the dunes is that thick miasma."

"I can't really picture what exactly that miasma even is, honestly."

Subaru cocked his head.

He had heard the word plenty of times, and it wasn't like he couldn't get some idea from the definition. Basically it was an atmosphere that had a negative influence on the body. Or at least something like that.

Maybe sort of like a poison gas?

"Um, Subaru, miasma is the word for mana that has been polluted by something bad. Mana is invisible, but it's still everywhere, right?"

"Eh? So miasma is mana?"

Subaru was shocked to find from Emilia's description that it was something much more immediately at hand than he was expecting.

But still, the description of polluted mana didn't really help him visualize it, either.

I guess it's partly because I'm a modern-day Japanese guy, but I can't really figure out this description of invisible mana.

“Ordinarily, mana doesn’t have any color, right? Miasma, mana polluted by something bad, is really not good for your body. But your gate naturally absorbs mana, so…”

“So you can’t stop from absorbing mana, just like you can’t just walk around without ever breathing.”

“The little lady’s right. And the miasma out there is the densest it gets anywhere in the world. If your gate keeps taking it in, your heart and body will be swallowed up in the pollution.”

“What happens then? Do you get sick—or go crazy or something?”

“The story goes that it eats away at your heart and body. The truth is… Well, I can’t really deny it.”

He shook his head at that and didn’t explain it any further.

But it was clear on his face. He had seen someone die from miasma pollution. And it was because he had experienced that that he was concerned for them from the depths of his heart and was warning them as adamantly as he was.

“If you can live your life without going there, then that’s for the best. You…”

“Thanks for the milk. And thanks for the story, too.”

Emilia finished her milk, but she shook her head at his warning.

Seeing that, the owner sighed in resignation. The reason he had spoken with them about the dunes even though he had not wanted to at first was because he had hoped to change their minds.

But unfortunately, they wouldn’t change their minds on that point.

“That should cover the bill. Subaru, let’s go.”

“Hmm, yeah. Thanks for the help.”

Leaving the silver coin she fished out on the counter, Emilia tugged Subaru’s sleeve. It was far too much for just two cups of milk, but it was also a tip for the information he had given them and the concern he had shown.

“—It’s just the past year or so now, but people have started to see a bird flying around over the dunes.”

“

flying toward the tower. So if you ever get lost in the dunes, look for a bird. If you're lucky, maybe it will guide you to the tower."

"Old man…"

"Hmph. If you're out there and have nothing better to rely on, your luck is already the worst it can be."

Subaru and Emilia lowered their heads and went back outside.

The sandstorm was dying down, and there was at least a little bit of visibility in the sea of brown clouding their vision. It was about time for them to return to the inn and meet back up with the others.

"The owner back there, it seems he lost a leg."

"…I didn't notice…"

"I don't know how he lost it, but…but I imagine I can guess where."

Emilia's purple eyes were filled with sorrow. Subaru nodded.

The owner had been awfully kind trying to plead with a couple of reckless travelers he had never met before about how dangerous the dunes were. If that was a warning from his own personal experience, then that would make them awfully ungrateful.

"—The Pleiades Watchtower."

Her mellifluous voice suddenly spoke the tower's name.

Looking up, Subaru turned his gaze to the eastern side of the town, to the tower that could be seen from the tavern and from the swirling, sandy streets—the tower that was hanging ominously over everything.

It was an enormous tower that had been visible from the road even before they arrived in Mirula.

It almost seemed to reach the heavens.

No matter how fierce the sandstorm in the desert down below, how could you possibly lose sight of it?

But Reinhard and the owner of the bar had both said how difficult it was and how reckless it was to try.

"The shady Sage's tower, huh…"

On the edges of his vision, the tower whose top he couldn't see seemed to waver in the sand.

3

They took one day of rest in Mirula, a reprieve from their long journey, but the dawn of departure soon arrived.

Everyone was wearing new clothes for traveling through the dunes and gathered at the entrance of the town early in the morning. Subaru gasped in amazement when he saw the state of the carriage waiting there.

"Hah, so this is our secret weapon for clearing the dunes, huh?"

Subaru was looking at the unfamiliar land dragon in the harness connected to the carriage.

It had a flat head, broad body, yellow scales, and walked on four legs. It was a similar sort of build to Otto's trusty Fulfew, but it seemed even more heavy-duty, like it would have a lot of stamina.

"It's a Gilas dragon that's strong in sandy climes. This dragon species is well suited for sandstorms and dry environments. It's on the bigger side, but it has a mild temperament and is easy to deal with. It's the endemic species here."

"Endemic species! They have stuff like that here, too? And there were the water dragons in Pristella, now that I think about it. This world really is a big place."

Julius explained the new land dragon while Subaru observed it.

In order to reach the Pleiades Watchtower, they would have to pass through a real desert. Because of that, they had switched out the land dragon they had brought with them with a local one in order to deal with the sand.

"Still, even if it has a mild temperament, will a new dragon be able to work in tandem that easily?"

"It won't be a problem. Land dragons have a natural affinity with people. Gilas dragons in particular can be calmed down quickly and easily by rubbing their necks. You should remember that, just to be safe."

"Sure thing. Though I doubt it'll work with Patlash."

Subaru shrugged as he glanced at the new dragon harnessed to the carriage and the black land dragon with a queen's demeanor. Unlike the dragon that would stay waiting in Mirula, Patlash was locked into joining them on this road.

"But will Patlash be okay in a place that requires a desert professional? I don't want to force a lady of ours to somewhere she shouldn't be."

"Have no fear. Your land dragon is a Diana dragon…a descendant of the first dragon said to rule over land, sea, and air. No matter the environment, she will perform well."

"Whoa there, that's like the background for a protagonist or

something. Almost a little too elite…”

“It would have been nice if we could bring my Shaknar, but there’s not much we could have done about that.”

Julius’s gaze drifted to the sky, as if looking off in the distance. Shaknar was his trusty blue land dragon.

Unfortunately, Julius had even been erased from Shaknar’s memories. In the end, he had to give up on getting it to obey him and leave it with the Iron Fangs in Pristella.

They were on their way to get everything back, but there were so many things that had to be left behind for the sake of their mission. Over the course of the past twenty days, Subaru had started to understand that almost as well as Julius.

“Still, treating your steed as the lady closest to you… I don’t know if I should compliment you for understanding how to properly handle a land dragon or scold you for your treatment of the women around you.”

“I’m sure you’ll come around once you get to know Patlash’s matronly style.”

Patlash had refused to have anything to do with Subaru for being left alone in Pristella during the incident. It wasn’t until Otto acted as a go-between that he found out Patlash was ashamed for not being by his side when everything went down. Once he knew that, Subaru wasn’t sure what to say.

“Anyway, I couldn’t think of anything other than hugging her. I love you, Patlas—bgha?!”

But the lady of the party wouldn’t accept such a shallow profession of love. She swung her tail around and knocked Subaru flying to the sandy ground.

Sprawling on the ground, he was sandy even before they could reach the dunes.

“…No sense of tension even right before the critical moment. I’m jealous of Barusu’s shamelessness.”

A face appeared upside down in his vision. It was Ram wearing a robe to protect against the sand. Subaru scratched his head at her icy response.

“So does that mean you’re nervous? Isn’t that a little out of character for you?”

“I’m not sure what would lead you to believe otherwise. As you can see, I am just a frail and weak maiden. I am in fear of all sorts of dangers at all times. My delicate bird’s heart might burst at any

moment.”

“Where did you catch the bird?”

Subaru raised his legs and swung himself forward to stand back up. He patted himself down to brush off the sand and then faced her again.

“Are you really okay?”

“…How impertinent. You’re awfully attentive despite being Barusu.”

“Your insults don’t have quite the same bite as usual. I should warn you: We still haven’t started yet.”

She didn’t look pale, and it wasn’t as if she was breathing heavily. She didn’t look any different from normal, but she didn’t deny what Subaru suggested, either.

She didn’t try to put up a strong front or try to hide it. In that regard, Ram was surprisingly earnest about it.

“It’s been one year and fifty days. Are you telling me to stop standing still with my goal in front of me after wasting all that time? How cruel.”

“Don’t say it like that, Ram.”

As her eyes flared and her glare chilled, Emilia chided her, having finished packing the big luggage into the carriage.

Emilia had her hand on her hip.

“Subaru is just worried about you. And I am, too. I’m doing the best I can to treat you every day like Roswaal asked, but…”

“Even with Beako helping, it still isn’t matching Roswaal’s treatments?”

“…I have no intention of using that as an excuse. And I won’t cause any trouble, either.”

“But we are worried about you.”

Ram didn’t immediately respond, but she did look unsatisfied at the quiet reply. The usual spirit was missing in her pink eyes.

She probably realized it herself. Ram sighed and turned her gaze to the carriage. In the back of it, the wheelchair was locked in, and Rem was sleeping in it—

“—Please don’t say something like you are going to leave me behind.”

It was a frank, ardent plea.

Hearing that, Subaru scratched his head and then looked over at Rem, too.

“I wouldn’t say that. But we can tell you aren’t at your best, so

if something happens, let us know as soon as you notice anything. There's no point in trying to hide it or fake it. We'll still just help you anyway."

"

Ram was sitting in her seat next to the wheelchair as she turned away from Emilia's gaze. Strangely, she seemed to be regretting her blunder.

"Hee-hee. Have you started to let me see the face that you always show Subaru?"

"…I let my guard down. Please forgive my discourtesy."

"I'm not angry. If anything, I'm a little happy. This way, it feels like you trust me more. I was always jealous of Subaru."

Ram was silent for a moment at Emilia's innocent response. But she soon turned to face Emilia again.

"You've changed, Lady Emilia. When we first met, you seemed as fragile as a glass doll, even though you didn't have anything other than a weak facade of a resolve."

"Do I seem a little bit stronger now?"

"Mm-hmm. And sweeter…like the glass has now become hardened sugar."

"That sounds *reeeally* delicious… So what does that mean?"

The half insult went over Emilia's head, and Ram simply sighed.

But once she did, her shoulders relaxed ever so slightly.

4

Two hours after leaving Mirula, they began their attempt to cross the Auguria Dunes.

Another dozen or so miles east of the town and all green disappeared from the surroundings. It was just desert as far as the eye could see, and a wind thick with dry sand and miasma.

"

head.

"No way, you're just imagining things. Patlash isn't that small-minded a dragon."

"…You would do well to foster a better understanding of your surroundings…"

Beatrice shifted her legs to ride sidesaddle as she held her skirt.

Compared to before, Subaru's riding skills had improved significantly, and it had become normal for the two of them to ride together. That was why he thought Beatrice was off the mark, but…

"Well, it's not like I really know why Patlash likes me in the first place."

"Indeed. In the first place, it's not like you are handsome enough to receive that sort of attention without any other reason."

"So then you have some sort of firm reason for loving me."

"Of course… Wait, what are you trying to get Betty to say?!"

Because they were in close proximity riding the dragon, there was no escaping Beatrice's red-faced tantrum. Subaru could only let her weak slaps rain on him as he soothed her ruffled feathers.

"—It is quite pleasant to see your harmonious exchange, but we are about to actually enter the sea of sand now."

Julius's voice called out to them from the driver's bench of the carriage being pulled alongside them.

Holding the reins of the carriage and able to connect effortlessly with a land dragon he had just met was to be expected of Julius. But seeing him driving a carriage instead of riding his own dragon really felt out of place.

And adding to that unbalanced image was the girl sitting next to him.

"Right. It's fine that you two get along so well, but if you can't control yourselves, I'll be upset."

Meili gave Subaru a sidelong glance that didn't really fit her age.

With the party finally facing the start of the real challenge, it was time for Meili to step into her element.

With the power of her blessing, the odds of them being attacked by demon beasts were dramatically decreased. In theory at least.

That was why Meili was sitting on the driver's bench and looking around their surroundings. And Julius beside her was the partner chosen in order to keep her from getting too bored.

"You know the nice knight sitting next to you is your escort for

the day, right? He's chic, swanky, and way more posh than I am."

"I don't know what you're talking about. And I don't have any complaints about Mister Knight, but you're the one who brought me along, mister. Doesn't that mean you have a responsibility to accompany me?"

"Don't be unreasonable. I've already got Beako taking up that slot."

"Mrgh!"

Beatrice started pummeling his chest again in anger, but Subaru just let her have at it as he looked over at Meili.

"I know how much you want to be fawned over, and I'd be happy to do it, but if you're going to talk about rights or responsibilities, then it will have to wait until you've done your job first."

"Fiiine. Even though you're already spoiling Beatrice. You big meanie."

He wasn't actually being particularly mean about it, but there was no helping that she might take it that way.

Beatrice seemed somehow satisfied with herself as Subaru tickled her neck and then raised his hand to Julius. Seeing that, Julius quietly nodded.

It was best to have someone who was an expert at dealing with proper young ladies take over.

But also—

"Subaru—the sand time seems to be starting."

Beatrice warned him, and Patlash looking straight ahead and whinnying slightly confirmed it.

The enormous tower that was impossible to miss even from back in Mirula soared into the sky before them. A yellow sand blew from the tower.

The Auguria Dunes's baptism, a sandstorm swirling with miasma—the sand time had arrived.

They had gotten a general grasp of the comings and goings for the sand times from their information gathering in Mirula.

Three times a day—morning, midday, and in the middle of the night—a powerful sandstorm would blow through these lands. That was what the locals called sand time. Considering what the owner of the tavern said about the miasma, it was almost like sidling up nice and close to a toxic waste dump site.

Particularly during the night sand time, which lasted for several

hours, it was difficult if not impossible to move. Because of that, they would be moving during the day and largely trying to avoid the morning and midday sand times.

The grains of sand on the ground were fine, and just like they had been warned, the footing was terrible. Their procession was forced to go at an extremely slow pace, and their irritation just increased like sand in an hourglass piling up.

But because of that situation, Subaru was also feeling a little let down.

Because—

"It's harder to walk with the wind blowing, but…it's not nearly as bad as I was imagining."

Turning his head away from the strong winds, he held his hand over his mouth, taking a couple of ginger breaths through the cloth blocking the sand. He could feel a little bit of sand in his mouth, but that was hardly any different from how it had been in town.

The world was a yellowish-brown color from all the sand flying, and it was annoying to have sand get into all the crevices of his clothes, but—

"That's all really. I was expecting it to be stupidly hot when I heard we were going to the sand dunes."

"The reason this area is a desert is because the intense miasma kills off all foliage. But it rains here, and it's not as if the temperature suddenly spikes or anything."

In Subaru's mind, a desert was a blazing hot sort of hell. But apparently in this world, desertification was caused by something other than what Subaru imagined, countering the image of burning sands that he had gotten from games and manga. If anything, the real thing was a lot easier to bear than what he had imagined.

"I guess considering how it felt in Mirula, it would be strange if it suddenly started burning up when we crossed into the dunes, too."

"Indeed. It's different from the Giral red dunes at the western edge of the world."

"What are they like then?"

"All the grains of sands making them up are fragments of magic stones. It is a land that is constantly exploding all year round."

"There's someplace as crazy as that?!"

His opinion of the Auguria Dunes jumped up at learning there

was someplace as insane as that in this world.

If the Sage had just built the tower there, no one would ever reach it.

"Meanwhile here, all there is to be careful of is the wind and miasma—and also the demon beasts."

"And also not losing sight of the tower and getting lost."

"Even if you say be careful not to get lost…"

Beatrice leaned against his chest, trying to get him to focus. Subaru supported her weight while looking at the grand and imposing tower directly in front of them.

"Don't get lost and all, but if you ask me, wouldn't the harder feat be somehow losing track of that?"

"Betty agrees. But anything might happen. There is no telling what sort of cunning person the Sage is, but there is no denying the fact that there is no evidence of anyone ever reaching it."

Of course Subaru had no intention of underestimating the dunes.

But thinking about it realistically, there was no way anyone should be able to lose track of such a massive marker. But that was surely what every other person who challenged the dunes and failed must have thought.

So then Beatrice was probably right. It was a place where anything could happen.

"—Should we really just keep going straight forward, Anastasia?"

"You're awful dubious, Natsuki."

Guiding Patlash toward the carriage, he checked with Anastasia through the window. Hearing her response, he winked.

"Obviously, right? This whole thing depends on you, so I'll be counting on you for some detailed navigation."

"Of course, it's not just someone else's business to me, either, so I won't cut corners. We're both in the same boat here, so just have a little faith."

"…Trusting a fox is easier said than done."

"

But there wasn't a thing to be gained from just being suspicious forever, either. Like Anastasia said, the moment they entered the Auguria Dunes, they were in the same boat. All that was left was to trust each other to carry out their respective roles.

"Isn't that right, Anastasia?"

"That's right—you don't need to worry. I keep my promises."

The last bit was soft enough that only Subaru could hear it.

Nodding, Subaru swung Patlash around toward the driver's bench, where he saw Julius looking completely serious while Meili was rolling around a bit, seemingly enjoying herself.

"Oh? Looks like you're having fun, Meili. Are you still doing your work?"

"Are you really asking me that? We haven't run into a demon beast once since entering the dunes, have we? That's proof I'm working, isn't it?"

"But it doesn't really look like you're trying very hard, either? It's not like I can tell whether us not being attacked is because of you or just that we're in an area without any?"

"—Hmph. In that case…"

Meili's eyes narrowed, and she raised her arms as Subaru started to get a bad feeling.

"Wait! I'm sorry, that was a stupid thing for me to say! It just slipped out because other than the sandstorms, this hasn't seemed nearly as bad as everyone kept saying!"

"Mm, I'm not mad. I just want to teach you to show a little gratitude for what I'm doing."

Ignoring Subaru's excuses, Meili smiled while saying something incredibly disturbing. Catching his breath, Subaru started to apologize again—but before he could say anything…

"Wh—?!"

It was about fifty yards to the side from the line they were riding along.

There was a faint tremble, and then suddenly the sand exploded up into the air. The massive body that had been hiding beneath the sand appeared aboveground.

"

Not a snake—it's a worm.

The almost twenty-yard-long worm burst out from underground, turning its massive mouth toward them. For a split second, Subaru readied himself to die.

"Ooookay! That's enough. You stink, so run along somewhere else."

"

Either way, what could be said for sure was—

"Well? What do you think of me now?"

"Seriously, I can't begin to thank you enough, Miss Meili!"

Unfrozen by Meili's words, Subaru spared nothing in his heartfelt praise.

"Really? Are you grateful now, mister?"

"Yeah, I got nothing but mad respect. I get now just how dangerous this place would be without you. This place is scary! Really scary!"

He could understand one of the reasons why so many reckless adventurers who had taken the challenge had never returned. And why the tavern owner would try to stop them, too. He had been a fool for thinking that the dunes were not all they were cracked up to be.

"Three cheers for peace. Long live peace. Let's keep this a super boring trip all the way to the end!"

"Such a glib flip-flopper as always. It is enough to make even Betty feel exasperated."

"Don't try to act tough. You wet yourself a little there, just like I did, right? I know."

"What did you say?!"

They started in again, but for now, there was no one blaming them.

Getting noisy would just provoke the demon beasts, but they had also just proved the effectiveness of their ability to deal with them. So Julius didn't try to stop their argument.

But everyone refocused themselves, realizing just how thin the ice they had been skating by on really was.

The fact that they could live to reflect on that was valuable enough for their first day in the dunes.

5

Their initial foray into the sandy region ended as soon as the sun set.

The biggest of the three sand times that happened each day occurred late at night. Before it happened, they were hoping to set up camp in an appropriate place for the night.

Perhaps because of the effect of the miasma, the stars were not visible. And of course, that meant that the Pleiades Watchtower they were using to navigate could no longer be seen, either, so it was best to just rest and recover for the night.

"Incidentally, will the demon beasts attack while you're sleeping, Meili? Will we be okay?"

"…You scare too easily, mister. I've got that covered."

After learning just how crazy the demon beasts of the dunes could be, Subaru had lost his nerve a bit, but Meili just sniffed, in a good mood at having put him in his place.

She was proud after having demonstrated her usefulness, but Subaru had experienced being killed by demon beasts before, so he was still uneasy. He was tempted to just sleep cuddled up with Meili if he had to.

"Upsy-daisy! This should be fine."

Ignoring Meili and Subaru's exchange, Emilia patted the ground where she had been squatting and then stood back up. Beside her, there was a big wall of ice that had just appeared.

She had formed it all around the carriage to provide their camp some cover. She was hoping to shut out the sandstorm during the night with her ice wall.

"I'm ashamed to have to continuously rely on your strength, Lady Emilia…"

"It's fine. You and Subaru were doing your best the whole time while we were moving after all. And for some reason, I've been reeeally feeling good ever since we entered the dunes. It feels like I can do anything!"

"Really? Amazing. I got too much sand in my mouth and haven't got enough water."

Emilia flexed unimpressively as Subaru and Julius exchanged tired glances.

—There's a special sort of heaviness to the air because of the miasma. The weird tiredness we've been feeling is probably a result of it, and it's also probably why no one was talking that much while we were moving, especially later in the day. I'd like to get out of these dunes as soon as possible, but…

"We must not get impatient. I do understand painfully well your desire to rush ahead."

Even though Subaru was just looking up at the dark eastern sky, Julius could guess what he was thinking and patted his shoulder.

Subaru snorted and turned around.

“All right, time to rest in preparation for tomorrow. The sand time should end around dawn, so…”

“I have to take care of Ram’s treatment first.”

“Ah, right. In that case, I’ll leave that to you and Beako.”

“Mm-hmm, leave it to us.”

The two of them went into the carriage where Ram was waiting in her seat—

“—Ngh.”

Through the closed door, Subaru could hear the voices from Ram’s treatment.

The intense, trembling voice that sounded like it was biting back against the pain was Ram. Emilia and Beatrice were working together to do the job that her lost horn had done.

The burden that Ram bore was another of the things that Subaru had only learned about because of this trip.

“It’s ironic. Ram has the tough sort of mentality to be able to survive by herself, but her body can’t handle living on her own.”

“…I don’t know. It’s true that Ms. Ram has a self-reliant strength, but that does not necessarily mean it is something that she wishes for herself. After all, it’s not as if she is ashamed of her current state.”

“…Well, that’s true, too.”

No one really cared what some outsider’s unrelated imagination of them was. Ram had her own thoughts, and it was a bit insincere to talk about her on appearances alone.

“Still, you’re really observant of people. It’s not like you’ve even spoken with Ram that much.”

“Something I’ve learned from painful experience. People can’t live alone. Were it not for you still miraculously remembering me, I don’t know what I would have done by now.”

“

“Whoops, that’s a pretty important thing to discuss.”

Just when a solemn silence was starting to fall over them, Anastasia broke in. She struggled to walk on the sand as she came over to the two.

“Whew, that’s a pain. I’m amazed both of you can walk around normally.”

“I’ve trained with poor footing. Though I can’t exactly claim it was all for this moment.”

“When the footing is bad, it’s better to step forcefully. That’s the Clind school of thought.”

That was part of the fundamentals he had learned for running on poor footing from his parkour instructor.

Anastasia nodded, seemingly a bit impressed, and then she lowered the cloth covering her mouth slightly.

“The winds are bad, too, and it’s hard to get enough air. I’d love to get out of here soon so I can take nice and deep breaths again.”

“Same. Also, I want to take a bath. Your face and head end up covered in sand so fast out here.”

He had now learned from painful experience why people who live in desert regions wrapped turbans around their heads. It worked against the sand and extreme heat and cold. It made sense logically, but people who lived in extreme environments really did have good reasons for what they did. Subaru had not exactly done nothing, but halfway measures were not enough to protect against the sand.

“Agreed on the bath. But getting out of theses dunes is gonna be troublesome— You both noticed, right?”

Her smile disappeared, and her voice dropped a little bit.

Subaru and Julius glanced at each other and nodded.

“Yes. We spent half a day today going straight toward the tower, and yet…”

“—It didn’t get any closer at all.”

Julius finished Subaru’s line, and then they both sighed.

On the first day, they had confirmed that they could deal with the sand time and that Meili’s anti–demon beast effect worked. But put another way, that was all they had achieved.

“Was this trick why Reinhard couldn’t reach the tower…?”

“When we spoke with him before, I had imagined something like this might happen…but it’s quite different to experience it ourselves.”

“Wait, so you noticed it, too?! Say so sooner!”

“I couldn’t be sure. I didn’t want to cause any undue alarm.”

“What’s with you people always doing this…?”

Julius had been concerned, but Subaru just glared up at him.

“Can you spare me that crap? I won’t be mad if you share your thoughts! If anything, that might be how we find the light at the end of the tunnel here. Where do all of you get the idea to just make a mental note and keep things to yourself? You think the situation’s just going to suddenly get better somehow that way? At least in my experience, there hasn’t been one time where I wished I hadn’t said anything!”

“O-okay. Apologies.”

“Even if it’s something that seems trivial, just tell someone immediately. ‘If you see something, say something’ is the most fundamental of fundamentals, right? And if you’re hiding anything else, Anastasia, you better spill it now.”

He reaffirmed for Julius and Anastasia the same thing he had told Ram. Julius looked like he was remorseful, faltering in a way that was unlike the finest knight.

Meanwhile, Anastasia put her hand to her mouth at Subaru’s broadside.

“Oh my. I never would have imagined being told off by you when we first met. But you’re right. I’ll have to reflect on my handling of it, too.”

“The first step in reflection is confession time. If you come clean now, I promise I won’t get too pissed.”

“You’re quite the charmer, Natsuki. This half day walking around the dunes, I firmed up a feeling I had. The reason we aren’t getting any closer to the tower is because the space around us is warped.”

“Warped…?”

Subaru cocked his head at Anastasia’s revelation. She pointed toward the direction where the tower was.

“Basically, the tower and the dunes are connected, but also not really connected. It’s possible we’ve just been walking around in circles in the same place this whole time.”

“And that’s why the Auguria Dunes are so impassable. It makes sense.”

Anastasia sounded almost indifferent as she explained, and Julius nodded deeply, as if understanding.

Of course, that was something that their guide Anastasia/Foxidna should already have known, though—

"I told you, didn't I? It took me half a day of close observation to be sure of it."

Sensing Subaru's eyes, Anastasia waved both hands, pleading that she had not been deceiving them.

It was incredibly suspicious, but with Julius there, too, he couldn't really press her too much further. He just let his suspicions go for the moment.

"Okay then, this twist in space has sunk countless adventurers before us, so how are we going to deal with it?"

"It's a difficult question. And breaking through might even be the wrong way of thinking about it. This could just be a natural trap created by the thick miasma. There doesn't have to be any intention behind it at all."

"This is a trap created by nature?!"

Subaru's eyes widened in shock at that unexpected possibility.

It was incredibly rare, but there were times when nature seemed to have an almost malicious lethality to it, so much so that it felt like nature had it out for people.

The mirages that could be seen in deserts, or snow overhangs that hid cliffs in areas with heavy snow, or more generally bottomless swamps or the ebb and flow of currents.

But for the dunes where the Pleiades Watchtower was built to be a natural trap—

"It's possible the tower was built here precisely because of this occurrence. That's a perfectly logical interpretation. It all depends on the intent of the watchtower's builders and the purpose it was designed to serve in the first place."

Julius's words managed to pull Subaru back from the unthinking cul-de-sac he was on the verge of getting trapped in.

The dunes being a natural, preexisting menace that the people who built the tower used for their own purposes rather than a trap created specifically for the sake of the tower. That was a plausible explanation. Particularly since—

"—The watchtower was supposedly made in order to keep watch on the shrine, where the Witch of Jealousy…"

That theory made sense and meshed with what they already knew. Subaru had a bitter look on his face.

There was a shrine on the far eastern edge of the Auguria Dunes

where the Witch of Jealousy was said to be sealed. The Pleiades Watchtower was said to be where the Sage could watch over that seal through the years.

If the twists in the dunes were a riddle created by humans, then solving it would lead them to their answer. But if it was just a natural mystery, then there was no guarantee that an answer that would satisfy them even existed.

"Maybe the reason the Sage never shows their face is because they can't get out, either?"

"That's an interesting theory… But don't go underestimating me."

"Huh?"

Subaru was feeling like he had stumbled blindly into a labyrinth, but Anastasia smiled fearlessly. Subaru's eyes widened at her reaction, and there was a look of anticipation in Julius's gaze.

"I'm the one who took the job of guiding us to the Pleiades Watchtower. Once a merchant takes a job, she follows through to the end. And I don't plan to fail now."

"Then you are able to see the path to the tower, Lady Anastasia?"

"Not me. But I do have an idea about who might be able to find it."

Anastasia looked off in the distance toward the tower. The wind was gradually picking up speed. The sound of the wind and sand hitting Emilia's ice wall started to get louder.

Listening to the sound of the sand, Anastasia's eyes narrowed.

"The sand times when the wind picks up are connected to the effects of space warping and shifting. The sand time is when the twisted space starts to come apart. And beyond those cracks is the real sea of sand that connects to the tower."

"The real…sea of sand…"

"And when it comes to finding that crack, the most important person here is—"

Anastasia's mouth cracked into a smile as she pointed her hand to a certain point. Looking there, Subaru and Julius both furrowed their brows.

She was pointing at the carriage where Emilia and Beatrice were working on taking care of Ram—

"—Ram. Ram is our key to getting outta this labyrinth of sand."

“I understand the situation. You are quite the slave driver.”

“I can’t really say much when you put it that way… Do you really understand, though?”

“Understand what? Your villainous streak, asking me to strain myself to the limit on the same day that you told me not to overdo it? Yes, I understand quite well, you brute.”

“Ugh.”

Subaru grimaced a bit and shrank under Ram’s harsh gaze.

Emilia, who was inside the carriage listening, also chimed in.

“Ram, it’s not like Subaru is asking you to do it because he wants to. He just immediately went back on what he originally said because he thought that was the best choi—”

“Emilia, that isn’t helping. I suppose it’s also just going to make Subaru even more depressed.”

Subaru was shriveling away as Beatrice stopped Emilia for him. Watching the three of them, Ram sighed in exasperation.

“So then what do you say? It was my idea, but do you think you can do it?”

“Barusu is correct. I am the only one who can fill the role you are suggesting, Lady Anastasia. And…”

Ram looked toward the back of the carriage where Rem was sleeping.

On the roads and in the desert, she had not complained at all. So the only thing growing was the anxiousness and self-reproach of all the people who cared about her.

And even if she couldn’t remember it, as Rem’s older sister, Ram had experienced those feelings more than anyone else.

“There’s a good and well-considered reason for it. So I won’t hesitate.”

Because of that, she could confidently take on the task set for her.

“But your condition is a concern. Your clairvoyance, was it? That wears you out, right?”

“There’s no other person suited to this task. It is technically a secret art of the Oni tribe, so no one else can use it.”

“Right… It would have been better if I could have taken your place…”

Emilia averted her eyes. She had been volunteering for a lot,

seemingly in great condition ever since entering the dunes. As far as Emilia could remember, Ram was the person who had taken care of her most at the manor. During the trip, she had been burning at the chance to pay her back, which was probably why she seemed ashamed to be unable to help with this.

“

of them, they could pin down that demon beast's location and rush the carriage there to get through the opening. But naturally, it wasn't that simple.

It was an enormous desert, and there were an absurd number of demon beasts of all types. Ram's clairvoyance could only connect with targets whose wavelength could be matched—she was going to have to try a lot of times.

"…Meili, skip the reports of demon beasts underground. There's no point if they can't see."

"I can't differentiate that much. Maybe you shouldn't give up on ones you find so quickly?"

As the failures piled up, the physical and mental exhaustion continued to build, and it was particularly bad for the two main prongs of this plan.

No, Meili is just pointing out the location of the demon beasts. But Ram's exhaustion from using her ability is getting worse and worse.

"Sand time comes three times a day. So those are the only shots we get at it. But we also can't let ourselves get impatient, either."

"We have a limited supply of rations and water. And the miasma here will affect them over time, too. It takes courage to choose to turn back. Remember we always have the option to return to Mirula."

As two days blended into three, it became necessary to pay attention to more than just their progress in getting through the dunes.

There was a limit to what provisions they could pack on the carriage, and the question of whether to go back reared its head every day—and soon every hour.

Was it some famous mountain climber who said the decision to turn back was the most difficult one to make?

"Do your best, Joseph! Everyone's counting on your horsepower!"

"Sorry, but please do your best!"

They had Emilia's ice wall, too, but in order to endure the fierce sandstorms of the sand time and keep moving forward, they had to rely on their new land dragon, Joseph. His abilities were specialized to the extreme climate, and the figure he cut pushing through the sand and the fierce wind was stunning.

But there was still a limit. Not just for dragons, but for Subaru and the rest, too.

"…Gh, no good. The connection broke."

Ram shook her head.

The past few days, Ram's exhaustion from all the misses she checked with her clairvoyance had been building to extreme levels.

Emilia and Beatrice wiped the sweat from her head and cast healing magic for her.

Ram's condition would improve slightly after her treatment every night, but even so—

"Things are going poorly."

"…Yeah, you don't have to tell me that."

Standing outside the carriage, Julius and Subaru were looking up at the bright sun.

When the sand time broke, the wind died down and the thick clouds parted, revealing a clear sky. Very much at odds with how their trip was going, the sky was actually bright and reassuring. At this point, it just annoyed Subaru.

"The idea itself isn't wrong. It's just a question of the stars aligning, I guess?"

Anastasia emerged from the carriage and joined the two of them.

"Stars aligning, huh?" Subaru scratched his head roughly. "In other words, it's pure luck… But it's not like any of us here are particularly lucky to begin with."

"No luck, bad luck, and tragic luck. That's the whole reason this trip started in the first place."

It was a sad thing to admit, but at any given moment, there was a high probability that they were all going to be abandoned by fortune.

—*Which is all the more reason we have to make our own luck.*

"Like I'm going to let this be swayed by something as vague as luck."

Subaru stretched his hand up to the sky and clenched it tightly.

Julius and Anastasia didn't say anything. But they seemed to be of the same opinion as they both stared at the blue sky together with Subaru.

And as the three of them looked at the sky…

"Ah. A bird. I guess it would want to fly around when the sky's this stunning."

Shading her eyes with her hand, Anastasia looked up. Looking in the same direction, Subaru saw she was right—there was a bird

flying in the sky.

It had been a while since they had seen a bird in the sky. They had not been uncommon on the road eastward before they reached Auguria, but by this point it was almost refreshing.

The air in the dunes is thick with miasma, though, particularly—

"A bird?"

Suddenly, a strange feeling stopped him.

Subaru furrowed his brow, trying to find the source of it. And then it hit—what the owner of the tavern in town had told them.

"—Ngh! Ram! Can you use your clairvoyance again?!"

On instinct, Subaru opened the door to the carriage and called for Ram. Ram was in the middle of treatment, and she glared at Subaru with a slightly reddened face.

"…What is it, Barusu? You should warn us before coming in—"

"I'm sorry! But save it for later! There's a bird flying in the sky right now! Can you see through its eyes?"

"A bird…? Why should I…?"

Put off by Subaru's intensity, Ram's brow furrowed, but Emilia, who was beside her, gasped and put her hand to her mouth.

"Subaru, a bird…"

"Right, the story we heard from the guy at the tavern. That the birds in the dunes fly toward the tower."

Of course, strictly speaking, it had not been anything so sure sounding as that. But at the moment, they needed all the help they could get to find a way through the sand time, so they should lend an ear to the advice of those who knew the area.

"Ram!"

"Stop shouting. You'll break my concentration."

Realizing the urgency of the situation from Emilia and Subaru's exchange, Ram had already started moving. Slumping deep into her seat, she took a single deep breath. And then the air about her changed.

"

“—Ngh! Julius! Get the carriage! Beako, come with me!”

—It was a once-in-a-lifetime shot, and they all leaped into motion.

Subaru held Beatrice as he leaped onto Patlash; Emilia slipped in next to Ram and supported her. Anastasia tumbled back into the carriage, and Meili went up to the driver’s seat.

And Julius cracked the reins, giving the land dragon the signal to run—

“Let’s go! This time, we’re gonna make it through the sand time!”

They started running across the sea of sand again, determined to break through.

7

—Follow the bird in the sky.

There was no evidence, and in a certain sense, it was an absolutely insane decision.

If it had been their first day in the dunes when Subaru saw the bird, he would never have thought to try to follow it based on what the tavern owner said.

But after several fruitless days, there was something he had noticed.

“The demon beasts are one thing, but there’s no way a normal bird could fly in the sky here.”

Of course, there were many reasons for that, including a lack of water and food to eat, but the biggest was the demon beasts and the miasma. Even a bird flying in the air would still be affected by the terrible environment and have to worry about predators.

So then why would a bird spread its wings in such a harsh environment?

“No matter how you look at it, that bird can’t be normal. There has to be some sort of trick to it.”

After having spent a few days out on the sands, that was the suspicion he felt about the bird flying over a hellscape like Auguria. And Ram’s clairvoyance was proving that his guess was right.

“Straight ahead. It isn’t letting the tower leave its sight at all. Barusu’s suspicion was correct. For once, his twisted, untrusting personality has paid off.”

“Phrasing!”

It wasn’t uncommon for migratory birds to fly for days at a time, but for it to keep focus on one place continuously was surely unusual.

However, following a bird that was flying without rest was a harsh task for those without wings.

—All the more so when trying to do it in the middle of a sandstorm.

“

been bellowing so loudly all around them could no longer be heard. The pelting grains of sand disappeared like an illusion.

There had always been more of a wind down when the sand time ended before.

The sandy wind gradually weakening until it withdrew like an ebbing tide and the smell of sand started to waft up. But that didn't happen. It was as if it had cut off all of a sudden.

As they had been dragged onto a completely different stage from where the sandstorm was blowing.

"—Julius."

Moving his dry lips as he turned, he saw the carriage sitting there.

Sitting on the driver's bench, Julius was looking stunned at having escaped the sandstorm, just like Subaru. However, hearing Subaru, he adjusted his grip on the reins and nodded.

"

Perhaps because the effects of the miasma had lessened after getting through the sand time, the stars were visible in the night sky. And with that light, it was clear to see that the silhouette of the tower had gotten closer.

As proof, they could even see the foot of the tower that had not been visible before—

“See, it’s proof that the stage has changed. The desert has become a field of flowers—”

“

her face, and there was a tense urgency in her eyes.

"Oiran bears…?"

"Demon beasts disguising themselves as flowers that attack people. Normally they lie in wait with their mates in forests, though…"

Hearing that, Subaru looked around again. The colorful flower garden extended as far as the eye could see—it depended on how big the demon beasts were, but it sure didn't look like just one or two.

A chill ran down Subaru's spine as he imagined being attacked by that many demon beasts.

"Subaru, what happened? Ram said her clairvoyance suddenly broke off…"

"—Stop there, Emilia-tan. Stay calm and stay quiet."

Emilia was peeking out of the small window on the carriage, but Subaru immediately gestured to stop her.

Emilia quickly closed her mouth, guessing from Subaru's tone of voice and the sudden appearance of a field of flowers that something strange was going on.

"These flowers…"

"If the sand time was the first stage, then the second is the garden of demon beasts… It looks like the Sage's nastiness is on a whole 'nother level."

A second trap set to catch people when their guard was down after having just cleared the first stage.

Meili's warning and the fact that the demon beasts just happened to be sleeping. Were it not for both of those…

"It's too soon to breathe easy… I suppose you should save it for after we get out of here."

"I'm not fearless enough to be able to breathe easily in a situation like this— The tower is…over there?"

Subaru managed to pry his gaze away from the field of flowers. The silhouette of the tower was much closer than before they pushed through the sand time. It had been correct to rely on Ram's clairvoyance.

However—

"Demon beasts are most violent right after they wake up. So…"

She probably wanted to tell everyone to keep quiet, but she stopped partway.

The reason was obvious.

—The field of flowers woke up. Slowly, as if the ground itself was being peeled upward.

“—Ngh.”

Subaru’s throat clenched as he saw a demon beast stand up a few yards in front of him. Not because of the sudden movement, but because of how repulsive the monster was.

“

its attention. It was almost like what a person might do to comfort a kitten. It would have been a cute image if it had actually been a kitten she was doing it to, but with a ferocious demon beast, it was like a scene from a horror movie.

"Psst psst psst psst."

She kept going, wagging her finger as she made noises, and gradually the oiran bear's attention shifted from her to her finger.

"Psst psst psst…pssst."

After centering its focus on her finger, she pointed it to the side of the carriage. Drawn by that, the oiran bear followed her finger's invitation, slowly taking one step in that direction.

"—Ngh."

Subaru accidently let out a little sigh of relief when he saw it starting to move away.

Emilia and Beatrice were still frozen, but the tension in their eyes was gradually abating. If the one that had already gotten up moved away, then they might be able to discuss how to deal with the rest of the field.

We haven't even had time to celebrate actually making it through the sand time together ye—

"

bear collapsed backward without a noise, dead, knocking several of its friends backward with it.

"Ruuuuuun!!!"

The moment he realized it was Emilia's preemptive attack, Subaru shouted.

Responding instantly, Julius cracked the reins violently, sending the carriage racing. And naturally Patlash started sprinting, too. They blew past the demon beasts standing still in shock and charged through the field of flowers.

And one beat later, the mob of demon beasts started running after them.

"They're coming they're coming they're coming they're coming they're comiiiiing!"

All around them, the enormous field of flowers peeled backward, releasing a sweet scent as the ferocious demon beasts pressed toward them. They were rising everywhere, from all around.

At the end of their long arms, it was like they were wearing nightmarish cactus gloves. If they had the same sort of strength as a bear, it was easy to imagine the nasty, bloody pulp that would be left if just one attack from that landed.

As sturdy as the carriage was, it wouldn't be able to hold out if a blow like that hit…

"Ey! Ya! Yeah! Youuuu…hit them!"

At some point, Emilia had leaped up on the roof of the carriage and was swinging both arms, creating countless ice blades to keep the demon beasts' savage attacks at bay.

The bluish dance of light visited a beautiful but cruel death upon the demon beasts, creating a little bit of space around the carriage.

"Whoooooa! That's my Emilia-tan! I'm falling in love all over again!"

"You seem awfully composed, Barusu. If you don't want to die, then you better run like your life depends on it."

"Obviously… Wait, Ram?!"

Subaru got excited at Emilia's fighting, but a cold voice brought him back down to earth. Looking over, he saw that the driver of the carriage had shifted from Julius to Ram.

Her exhaustion from using clairvoyance was still obvious on her face, but it didn't affect her handling of the reins. Leaving the

driving to her, Julius had drawn his sword and moved around to the side of the carriage, deftly slashing any demon beasts that dared approach.

"I cannot allow Lady Emilia to shoulder this burden alone."

Sensing Subaru's eyes, Julius responded with grace and refinement. All the while, his knight's sword flashed adroitly, piercing the arms and faces of several different demon beasts, shaving away at their ability to fight. Thrusting forcefully at another that charged in, there was a flash as his blade pierced straight into its head, destroying its brain.

Minimal motion for maximal effect. The epitome of the finest swordsmanship.

"Damn it. I'm not gonna lose now! You ready to go, Beako?!"

"Naturally! You aren't going to run out of gas, are you, Suba… ru?!"

Subaru was holding the reins in one hand while lifting Beatrice up with the other, standing her up on Patlash's back. They held hands, and Subaru felt something fiery welling up in the pit of his stomach—

"Minya!"

A purple crystal appeared with her cast, taking aim at a demon beast blocking Patlash's path. Lining up the target, accelerating for a brief instant, and then it hit.

Hit by the purple arrow, the demon beast recoiled as its head crystallized and then shattered like glass.

"All right, good one, Beako!"

"But I can't fire recklessly! We have to carefully manage yo—*Minya!*"

"What happened to careful management?!"

Beatrice's ability to keep fighting depended on Subaru's mana supply.

And unfortunately, Subaru's mana was a drop in the bucket compared to the number of demon beasts they were dealing with. Beatrice's tuning ability was top-notch, but each shot still shaved away at Subaru's spirit.

Emilia, Julius, and Subaru and Beatrice were all fighting the good fight, and set off by that—

"Ugh! Arrrgh! This was my ace in the hole!"

Their ultimate weapon who had stayed silent so far finally stood up and stamped on the carriage with a red face.

Looking at the demon beasts that refused to obey her, she held out her palm.

“Here’s a punishment for bad children! Come, sandworm!”

It sounded like the words of a sulking child picking a fight, but in response, there was a tremendous force that shook the ground beneath the oiran bears. Sand welled up from the ground as the enormous sandworm reared its head.

“

There was a faint feeling of something off. It was light. Somewhere on the middle of the tower, it looked like something was shining.

“Wh—?”

But he never finished his question.

“

CHAPTER 3

THE WATCHTOWER BAPTISM

1

—I saw a light. That's all.

He could remember looking straight up at the tower in front of him.

Then he noticed a light out of the corner of his eye, and his eyes had reacted to it.

But that was all he could remember.

No pain, no shock, no fear.

For Subaru Natsuki, at least one of those was always present when he experienced death.

An intense pain that made him want to cry, a bloodcurdling shock, or the terror of losing everything. Instead, there was nothing. In a way, it had been a far kinder death than any other he had experienced.

Of course, in the moment, with his head vaporized, Subaru had not been able to perceive the kindness of the death, but also, he didn't have any time to linger on the memory of it.

It was like the blink of an eye. It was no more than a single instant, barely long enough to notice that his vision had gone dark, and then he had returned to life, moving backward to be thrown back into reality.

"—Psst psst psst."

"

The sound of blood flowing through his body was distractingly loud in his ears, and a lance of pain shot through him when he tried to stretch and flex his muscles. He was gripping the reins so tightly his fingernails were biting into his palm, and Beatrice's warm body pressed against his chest.

"…Wha—?"

In the dim light, he looked down at Beatrice's head from up close.

The aggressively sweet scent that filled his nose was different from what he usually smelled whenever he hugged her tight. There was a sickly sweetness to it, almost like toxic gas clinging to his nostrils.

Subaru had once heard that smell was the sense most strongly connected with memory.

But there was no need to resort to memory to experience that scent now. It was all around him.

The bigger problem was that his memory associated with that smell cut off only a few seconds ago.

"Psst psst psst psst."

As Subaru's consciousness struggled to catch up, a rhythmic sound rang in his ears.

Beatrice, who he was holding tightly to his chest, had gone stiff, and Patlash was watching with bated breath, eyeing the terrifying demon beast standing right in front of the carriage where Emilia and Rem were riding.

It was a ferocious, blood-starved demon beast with thin roots all over its body—an oiran bear.

That instant, the raw reality of his death finally hit Subaru in a way that a phrase like déjà vu couldn't even begin to describe, and he started to shudder.

There's no mistaking it. I definitely died and came back.

Subaru Natsuki had returned by death.

"—Ngh."

—But why did I come back to now of all times?

Subaru gnashed his teeth more at the checkpoint he'd been saddled with than the fact that he had died.

Meili was trying to coax the demon beast to peacefully pass by the carriage. She would end up succeeding, just barely, but things would get real messy real fast.

Because Joseph, the land dragon pulling the carriage, would

panic under the pressure of the demon beast's overwhelming presence.

“

—It was exactly the same as before.

"—Ngh."

It was the first time Subaru had ever experienced a reset that was such a waste.

There had been plenty of times he failed to fully comprehend what he had learned the last time and ended up dying in the same way. But this was the first reset where he found himself so incapable of doing anything other than repeating the same mistake.

"Subaru! We don't have time to get distracted!"

Subaru gritted his teeth in frustration as Beatrice slammed her back against his chest. Looking forward, he saw a ferocious demon beast approaching from the front with a big swinging fist.

At the same time, he grabbed her small, outstretched hand, and Beatrice stood up and started firing.

"*Minya! Minya!* And another *Minya*!"

The mana in Subaru's body passed through his hand and transformed into destructive power under Beatrice's guidance.

The purple crystals she created pierced the demon beasts and crystallized their hideous bodies, which Patlash shattered as she raced forward through them.

"My ace-in-the-hole sandworm!"

Hearing Meili's desperate shout, Subaru saw an explosion of sand out of the corner of his eye.

The sandworm rose from the soft ground that lay beneath a field of flowers that the oiran bears had set out, swallowing several of them in its enormous maw and crushing another dozen with its massive body.

It was clash of the titans two—but this wasn't enough to turn things around.

"—Barusu! If you don't want to die, then ride like your life depends on it!"

Subaru was simmering in an aimless anxiety as a voice scolded him sharply. It was Ram on the driver's bench of the carriage, reins in hand, doing an excellent job of controlling the agitated Joseph. She was controlling him with a masterful ability that matched Rem's, but unless something changed soon, it would all be for naught.

"We can't go toward the tower like this! Ram, change routes!"

"—Ngh. What are you saying? It's a straight shot to the tower, and every other direction is filled with demon beasts!"

“I know, but if we keep going this way, it won’t work!”

“If you’ve noticed something, then just spit it out, Barusu!”

“If I could, I would! For now, just change routes!”

Ram shouted angrily at Subaru, but he couldn’t do anything other than yell back. It was infuriating, but he couldn’t say anything more concrete. He didn’t know how he died before.

With every other death he had experienced, there had been room to maneuver, and he relied on the information gleaned from that to get around whatever was checkmating him.

But this time there was no thread to pull to invoke a better fate. And he didn’t have time to search for it, either.

—This is a nasty way to seal my reset ability.

“Ram! Do what Subaru said!” Ram was arguing with what were obviously nonsensical instructions, but Emilia came down on Subaru’s side. Unleashing a fusillade of ice chunks at the demon beasts, she nodded forcefully. “Subaru wouldn’t say something strange like that without a good reason!”

“Barusu says strange things and shares rash ideas almost every time he opens his mouth!”

“Subaru wouldn’t ever say something strange like that in such a dangerous situation without a good reason!”

“Gee, thanks for that clarification!”

He wasn’t sure whether to bemoan being treated like the boy who cried wolf or be proud that Emilia treated him as a guy who could be relied on in a pinch.

Save it for later.

Patlash stuck her front legs into the sand and executed a hairpin turn. She kicked hard, sending a rampaging oiran bear flying before dashing off in the new direction.

“—Ngh! Hold on tight, everyone outside! Don’t get knocked off!”

Following Subaru, Ram deftly guided Joseph into the same direction. The top of the carriage was particularly more unstable in such a swerve, so Emilia and Julius were forced to hang on to the ceiling for dear life to avoid being thrown off.

There was a violent thud as the carriage sideswiped a demon beast, but it somehow managed to make the turn and hold together in—

“

air.

Turning around reflexively, Subaru saw what had happened.

“The sandworm…gh.”

—Behind them was a twenty-yard-long sandworm towering over the sands.

Its torso exploded like it had taken a direct hit from an artillery round.

And unable to support its massive body anymore, it slowly—

“Get out of the wayyyyy!!!”

The sandworm’s body slumping to the ground was more than heavy enough to completely flatten the carriage.

The oiran bears caught underneath it cried out in agony as Subaru and Ram directed their land dragons, forcibly changing course to avoid the falling sandworm.

“Whoaaaaaa?!”

An explosive shock wave rippled out, and a cloud of sand swallowed him. Losing his grip on the reins, Subaru immediately leaped, clutching Beatrice tightly to his chest.

He rolled across the sand hard, rolling, rolling, until finally he stopped.

“Th-th-that was dangerous…!”

“Subaru! We messed up!”

His face was covered in sand, but he only had a moment to breathe a sigh of relief before Beatrice shouted. She brushed away the flower petals in her face and stared at the dense cloud of dust filling the sky.

“We’ve gotten separated from the carriage! We’re all alone!”

“What?!”

Frantically looking around, he saw the giant sandworm’s corpse lying on the ground in the rising sand. The oiran bears that got caught under it had all been turned into hideous corpses, and the desert had become a sea of blood.

And that sea had cut off Subaru and Beatrice from Emilia and everyone else.

In the distance, he could hear the demon beast roars and the earsplitting sounds of combat. They were still fighting hard over there. But they would have to overcome a swarm of demon beasts in order to meet back up again.

“Half the fighting strength! And it feels like twice as many enemies…!”

“I suppose that means it’s four times worse than before!”

Hearing Beatrice’s determination, Subaru bit his lip, strongly regretting his choice.

My mistake, my failure. I didn’t get enough value out of my last loop.

I thought I had learned to do more, that I could do more things now, that I was a little better than before.

But fate just laughed at Subaru Natsuki’s superficial wit and tricks, crushing them all underfoot.

“That bastard Regulus was a lot easier to deal with than a swarm of demon beasts…!”

“We don’t have time for your grumbling! We have to—”

“I know! I need to think of—”

Standing up, he looked around for Patlash so they could start moving. Without her legs, no plan he could come up with had any chance of working.

In that moment, he noticed a white light at the edge of his vision, and every hair on his body stood on end.

“Light—”

Just as the word left his stunned lips, *it* closed in on him from across the sands.

The white light beaming out from the middle of the watchtower. It tore through sandy ground, shredding the demon beasts in its path as it flew straight toward him.

The moment it was about to mercilessly shatter Subaru Natsuki

—

“—gh.”

A black shadow leaped in front of Subaru, and then he went tumbling.

Subaru’s body flew across the sand from the impact. His head hurt, and he was woozy. Realizing he was splayed on the ground, he blinked several times.

“Wh…at…?”

Propping himself up like he was just getting out of bed, he looked around. And then he noticed it.

Patlash’s big body had collapsed beside him, completely limp. There was a terrible wound in her side, and the smell of burnt flesh and blood was wafting from it.

Recalling what had just happened, Subaru realized that Patlash had covered him.

“—Subaru!”

Just as he realized what happened, Beatrice cried out his name. Looking over, he saw her running from a short distance away. She had a pained, sorrowful expression on her face.

Following her blue eyes, Subaru saw his own body.

Just like Patlash’s wound, there was a clean hole blown through the right side of his stomach.

“Agh…”

When he saw the wound, blood welled up in his throat, and his vision tilted to the side.

He had collapsed and couldn’t move anymore. All the strength left his body, and his consciousness faded.

He sensed someone kneeling next to him.

“Subaru! Subaru! No! You can’t…don’t—don’t die…don’t leave me alone…! Nooo!”

His shoulder was being shaken. He could hear a tearful cry. He wanted to reach out his hand, but he couldn’t move.

Such a pretty face…but she’s crying… I can’t make her cry…

“Don’t leave Betty behind…”

She was sobbing as she desperately hugged Subaru.

Subaru’s limp body was too much for her little arms to support, but even so, she tried her best.

Tears streaked down her cheeks. At the very least, he wanted to wipe those tears for her.

He searched everywhere on his body for something that could move, but nothing worked. But if his body couldn’t move, then he just had to draw on something that wasn’t part of his body.

“…Subaru…?”

—An invisible hand, something that only he could see, wiped the tears from her cheek.

The black finger touched the teardrop, and she was looking at Subaru as if realizing something. He tried to smile to put her at ease, but he didn’t have the strength.

“Suba—”

She started to say something.

But the white light that came flying from somewhere far off in the distance interrupted her.

Another shock pierced Subaru’s chest.

Looking down slowly, he saw it had pierced the back of the girl clinging to him and then kept going until it had gone through his

chest and out the back.

“—Ahh.”

That rasp was her last.

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, the girl’s body transformed into particles of light and disappeared.

As if she had never existed.

“Agh…”

Without her support, Subaru collapsed to the ground, unable to move. Without a reason to move.

Pierced by the unfathomable white streak, Subaru’s insides were completely destroyed. And the swarm of demon beasts drew toward him, licking their lips.

“

landed, he confirmed there was no more wound as his thoughts roared into motion.

It was shocking, but he had to quickly shift gears. Forgetting about the swarm of monsters that had been chasing them a minute ago, he focused on the most immediate problem at hand.

The problem at hand. The problem at hand. What—what is it? What's going to happen?

The smell, the sweetness, annoying, annoying, itchy, painful.

Which one is now?

His brain, which had been used and abused until he could swear it was boiling, suddenly realized something.

He could feel Beatrice twitching ever so slightly against his chest. Seeing her watch the oiran bear's every move without making so much as a sound breathed life back into Subaru's brain cells.

The death he just experienced came rushing back, as did Beatrice's sobs and teary face.

Right, right, right.

Subaru had already died twice. This was his third time experiencing this moment.

The first time had been a death he couldn't understand. The second was—

No, save it for later.

"Psst psst psst…pssst."

Right as his mind started running again, Meili caught the oiran bear's attention.

Drawn by her sounds and finger movement, the demon beast's focus shifted away from the carriage. But that wouldn't be enough for the menace to pass and everyone to breathe a sigh of relief.

As the oiran bear slowly turned, the land dragon right in front of it breathed raggedly.

Dealing with the overwhelming pressure of staring down the demon beast at close range and the scent of the flowers that made it so difficult to focus—the land dragon's composure was steadily being worn down, and when that last thread frayed and broke, it would lose control.

If Subaru couldn't stop it, then he would be destined to repeat the same death.

I have to stop it from panicking. But how?

He couldn't raise his voice. It was difficult to convey the

situation to Julius, who was holding the land dragon's reins.

—There's no time.

Without a eureka moment in the next second, he would just have to roll the dice and call out to Julius.

The last death had involved a stampede of demon beasts and the light from the watchtower…and Beatrice's tears—

"—Beako, I love you."

"—?!"

Hugging her small body from behind, he whispered in her ear. Beatrice was shocked by that unprompted confession, but his hand was covering her mouth so she couldn't say anything.

Instead, Subaru reached a hand out to the dragon in front of him—toward Joseph. A hand to gently soothe it, just like how he had wiped a tear from Beatrice's cheek before he died.

—Invisible Providence.

He was busy telling Beatrice he loved her, so he just said the ability's name in his mind.

All of a sudden, in the center of his chest—it was a different feeling from when Beatrice was helping him channel mana—the black power was exuberant when he called it forth. An otherworldly invisible hand cheered at the opportunity to accomplish a noble task in slothful Subaru Natsuki's stead.

"

body.

"—Hmm?"

Julius noticed the change, and he gently pulled the reins and started to pacify the dragon as well. Joseph started visibly calming down. Just the sort of expertise one would expect from Julius.

In that moment, Subaru broke the connection with the invisible hand, and the black hand faded away.

"Hah, phew…"

That should be the immediate problem handled at least.

The cost had been relying on a taboo power, but Subaru Natsuki's style was to always use any cards he had to play.

He didn't have any qualms with that. But what bothered him was that the effect of having used the invisible hand was so much less intense than last time.

The first time in the sanctuary when he used it against Garfiel, it had felt like half of his body had been stolen from him. But this time all that happened was he was breathing a little heavily.

"It's not just that I'm getting used to it…"

Subaru felt more uneasy than relieved to have the sense of loss and hatred be so much lighter than before.

It is better to have an option than not, but there's nothing good about more rounds in the chamber when the game is Russian roulette. It's a powerful ace in the hole, but—

"…Th-that's enough, Subaru."

Beatrice started struggling a bit in response to Subaru holding her up for so long. That was enough to finally draw his attention back to reality. He started to apologize when—

"What happened, Beako? What's with that look…?"

"It's because you've been kneading Betty's hair this whole time! What were you thinking?!"

"Huh? I was?"

Beatrice skillfully kept her voice down as she angrily let Subaru have it.

Her glorious hair had been interwoven and tied up and had lost all shape. It was a style on the bleeding edge of fashion that was a little too far out for anyone to catch up with her.

"The fact that you didn't even realize you were doing it is annoying… You probably don't even remember what you whispered to Betty, either."

"No, I remember that. Because I'll love you forever."

“Gah!”

Beatrice’s face turned red immediately, and she covered her head with the cloak she was wearing.

Subaru would have loved to enjoy Beatrice’s adorableness a bit more, but he couldn’t afford to play with her at the moment.

Meili’s bold strategy had managed to get them out of the oiran bear encirclement, and they finally had a moment to take a deep breath. Subaru looked around, spotting an area that wasn’t a part of the flower field.

When Julius glanced at him, he gestured to head over there to talk.

Fall back for now. It’s time to strategize.

3

“Just when I was thinking we had cleared the sand time, this happens.”

“It definitely feels like a full dose of the Sage’s nastiness. There’s no opening and no letting our guard down.”

Julius and Subaru both sighed after moving away from the flowers to a place where they could be confident in not provoking the oiran bears.

Inside the carriage, Emilia and everyone else were in agreement. Emilia was patting Meili’s head.

“If you weren’t there, Meili, it would have been terrible. Thank you sooo much.”

“I-it would have been dangerous for me surrounded by that many of them. That’s all.”

Meili looked away and responded curtly. But there was a faint redness to her cheeks. It was adorable that she couldn’t quite hide how she was really feeling.

Either way, though, Emilia was right. Meili had made a huge contribution. And in that sense, so had Ram when it came to actually breaking through the sand time.

“How is your body doing, Ram?”

“…Is this the time to be worrying about me? We don’t have the leeway for that.”

Ram fired back in a slightly hoarse voice. The night was dark in the desert, so he couldn’t see her face clearly. But Ram’s already pale skin looked even paler than usual, indicating just how

exhausted she had to be.

But she didn't pay any heed to Subaru's gaze and looked over at Meili.

"What about that flower field, Meili? Can you get all of those demon beasts to get out of our way with your ability?"

"Like I said before, it's difficult. If there were only a hundred, I could do something, but when it gets to be more than that, it's hard, even for me."

"A hundred, huh? That is already quite remarkable. Unfortunately…"

Julius looked over toward the flower field. Even at a glance, it was clear that there had to be more than a thousand of them there. There might even be more than ten thousand. It wasn't a number that Meili could handle.

As a heavy mood settled around them, Julius held up two fingers.

"Our options right now are to continue forward or to go back."

"Is going back even an option? It won't solve anything."

"Can you be sure? It's entirely possible that when we passed through the sand time that it just happened to connect here. If we pass through a different crack in space, it is possible we might end up at another place even closer to the tower."

Subaru was skeptical of that possibility, but he had no hard evidence to deny it, either. The fact was that there were three different sand times.

They had passed through the sand time during the night, but there was a chance that the morning and midday ones were different—

"…Spare me such naive optimism."

As Subaru was considering that, Ram's quiet voice rang in his ear.

It was none other than the person who had worked the hardest to get through the sand time who glared at Subaru and Julius.

"Would the Sage who has gone so far out of their way to reject outsiders really leave an easy path someplace? There's no way. Retreating into dreams in the face of a punishing reality is the last resort of cowards who want an easier way."

"You… We're just talking about the possibility of even a slightly safer path."

"We embarked on this journey well aware that it would be

dangerous. The resolution to lose something is necessary to ever be able to gain anything. Or were you planning to win without ever risking anything? How arrogant can you be?"

Faced with Ram's fierce tongue-lashing, Subaru paused for a moment and then let out a deep breath.

Ram was intentionally phrasing it provocatively to urge them forward. And there was of course a logic to what she was saying, too. But there was also a logic to what Julius had said.

All that was left was to decide which one—

"Meili, what about just making the ones on the path we take move out of our way?"

"Try to narrow it down instead of moving all of them? In that case…"

Meili focused on the field, examining it closely.

"If it's just that much, then I think I can do it. Move them out of the path, and then make them go back to sleep once they're far enough away… Yeah, it's okay. I can do it."

At the very least, she was in agreement with Ram on moving forward. Hearing that, Subaru turned to everyone else.

"It might sound like a flip-flop, but I agree with Ram. There's certainly a possibility of something different if we go through a different sand time, but if it is demon beasts blocking our way, then at least we have Meili with us."

"There's also the possibility that this is better than what we would find anywhere else."

Beatrice nodded as well while fixing the hair that Subaru had messed up.

"In the end, we have no choice but to rely on Meili. In the worst case, if the demon beasts do wake up, then it will be up to Emilia-tan and Julius—and me and Beatrice. Sorry."

"

was a powerful determination in her purple eyes, and she was looking at the tower that lay beyond the field of flowers.

"The path is straight, and the tower is right ahead— If anything happens, I'll be there to help everyone, no matter what."

"—You are surprisingly muscle-brained when it comes to situations like this, Emilia-tan."

"Muscle-br…eh? What do you mean all of a sudden? Ahh, don't embarrass me like that."

Emilia kept a cool look while saying it, but she started blushing at Subaru's wry comment. She didn't really get the meaning of muscle-brained, but there was something cute about the way she blushed.

"Surprisingly for me, muscle-brained wasn't exactly an unalloyed compliment for Emilia-tan… Yeah, nope, I probably meant it as compliment. I'm head over heels all over again. E M T all the way."

He realized again just how important the girl who was looking so resolutely ahead was to him, of how much he loved her.

With Emilia, Ram, and Meili in the keep-moving camp—

"So then all that's left is what Anastasia and Julius think, but…"

"Not much I can say there. We already have a majority, and I'm not exactly keen on trying to go against it. But I do want to think a little bit more about whether this place is really what it seems."

Anastasia put her hand to her cheek. Hearing her response, Julius turned to her.

"Do you have some sort of concern about this garden of demon beasts, Lady Anastasia?"

"Nothing that big. But there was a cranny for slipping through the sand time, right? So I just wondered whether there was something like that for this field, too, is all. What do you think, Beatrice?"

"—Why would you ask Betty?"

Beatrice's cheek tensed when Anastasia, or rather Foxidna, turned to her. Anastasia's lips softened at Beatrice's hostile response.

"From what I've heard, you're a specialist in dark magic, right? And when you're talkin' 'bout dark magic, then twists in space are sort of dark magic's bread and butter…so I was just wondering if you might notice something is all."

"…The sand time was a natural disruption, but the way it twisted was similar in structure to Betty's Passage. That is what Betty felt passing through it."

Answering the question calmly, Beatrice looked up at Subaru.

"A long while back, Betty cast a similar spell on Subaru."

"On me? When?"

"…The first time we met."

"The first… Ah! When I cleared that infinite-loop-looking hallway on the first try! Sorry for that after all the work you put into setting it up."

"It's annoying that it feels like you are genuinely apologizing. Just forget about it!"

"You're the one who brought it up…"

Beatrice's cheeks puffed out in a pout as Subaru shrugged passively. But he couldn't ignore what Beatrice and Anastasia were saying.

If they actually had some idea other than just passing through the field, then that would be the best.

But also, there was one more problem they couldn't afford to ignore still hanging in the air.

"—One question I had, though. Did anyone notice a light shining from the tower?"

"A light from the tower?"

Emilia and everyone else looked confused at his question.

—The white light emanating from the watchtower. He didn't understand the details, but it was what caused his death twice now.

The first time he had not even been able to react to it, and the second time he had avoided an instant death only thanks to Patlash. Were it not for her, Subaru would have been killed on sight again, and he would have had to face this loop still ignorant about the light.

But even if he had brought back some information from his last death, it wasn't a simple thing to come up with a way to deal with that light.

"I didn't notice anything. Did you see a light shining from the watchtower, Subaru?"

"Hmm, ah, yeah. I don't think I was just seeing things. There was definitely a gleam from the tower, and…"

"Does that mean the Sage in the tower noticed us?"

"They don't have to notice us to turn on a light at night. Maybe

that's all it was?"

"I see. Assuming for the moment the Sage has noticed us, then perhaps if we indicate we mean no harm, there will be some contact."

The fact that his explanation had been vague due to not being able to explain his death resets had come back to bite him.

Once he started talking about lights, it was only natural that they would start imagining something like a room light or a lamp. It would be stupid to assume a lethal hostility right from the start. He had to find some way to get the dangerousness of that light across without flirting with the taboo of his ability, though—

"—How did the light look to you, Barusu?"

While he was struggling to find a way to change the conversation's flow, Ram threw him a line. She was crossing her arms as she turned the topic back to Subaru, who took his time phrasing it.

"I…I think it was something dangerous. At the very least, it didn't seem friendly."

"Any evidence other than gut instinct?"

"…Well, not really."

That was the part that made the least sense in Subaru's explanation. With no evidence he could point to, though, he had no choice but to call it instinct and try to make it stick. Because of that, he expected Ram of all people to be exasperated, but:

"I see—that's a problem."

Ram took his answer seriously— *No, it's not just her.*

Emilia and Julius and even Anastasia had serious looks on their faces.

"Huh? What? I just said it was gut instinct. No one's going to get suspicious about that?"

"Maybe if it was just instinct, but it's your instinct, right? In that case, it's better to take it seriously than suspect it, if you ask me."

"You should not be so self-deprecating. You have made it through quite a number of trials and tribulations. There is an instinct that only people who have survived those sorts of situations can develop. Call it a wealth of experience."

"A field rat knows to change its den before the heavy rains come. Barusu's instinct isn't to be made light of."

"That's already making pretty light of it…but I get it."

They all gave their own reasons for trusting what he claimed to be simply intuition. They were all telling him that even if it was just his instinct, they trusted him.

He felt a wave of relief at their stance. Even from Julius.

Rubbing his nose for a moment at the feeling, Subaru looked away from his comrades.

Because of that, he didn't notice it. The first to notice was Ram.

"Barusu, that's—"

"Eh?"

Ram's voice was dead serious. Following her gaze, he saw her looking at his chest. Looking down, he saw it, too.

There was an unusual red point of light shining on the chest of his cloak.

"

about to skewer Subaru.

His face was dead serious as he perfectly tracked the ray of light whose force had weakened ever so slightly from Emilia's ice wall. The light spun and deflected away, landing in the sand beside them. A white smoke rose from it.

For the first time, Subaru had avoided a direct hit from it and could see that it was—

"…A needle?"

The unknown object was glowing as it stuck out of the sand. In the dark of night, it was an oppressively brilliant intense white—and it looked like a long, thin needle.

The needle started to crumble from the back and disappeared in the wind.

"Barusu! The next one's coming!"

Subaru had been reaching out to grab the light that was disappearing when Ram's warning hit. The red point on his chest was still there. Another round was coming.

Until he died, the light would—

"Beako, are you ready?!"

"A stupid question!"

Beatrice was never going to say she couldn't do it to Subaru's question. Changing gears, Subaru gritted his teeth hearing his reliable partner's response and made up his mind.

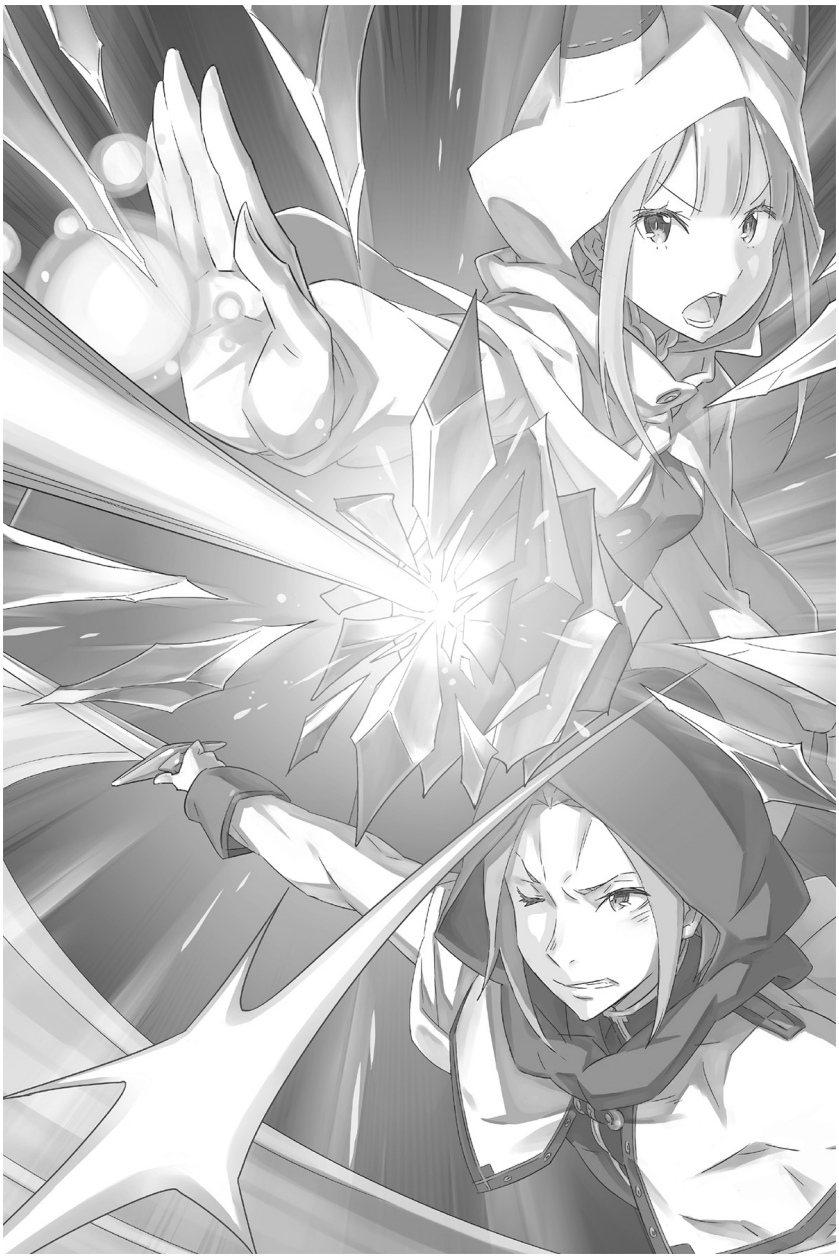
"Emilia-tan!"

"

slower—and at that point, the knight's sword pierced it.

"Again, I will not allow it!"

If the first time had been a miracle, the second was a combination of training and technique. Emilia and Julius used their abilities to the limit to protect Subaru from the death that had him in its sights.



In that moment, Subaru and Beatrice unleashed their mystic art.

“—E! M! T!”

“I suppose!”

Flipping up the hood of his cloak, Subaru shouted his praise for Emilia—or rather, a cast.

In time with that, Beatrice collected every last bit of mana inside Subaru and formed a complex and mysterious spell, something completely new and unknown.

—What they were weaving was one of three original spells that they had created.

When the magic was complete, a faint light expanded with the two of them at its center. It spread as if creating a ball of light enveloping all of them, and then the field was complete.

“This is…”

Julius was stunned trying to decipher what it was when at the edge of his vision he saw another beam of light coming for Subaru. Julius immediately tensed, but that was stolen away a moment later by the change that he saw.

The force of the light coming toward Subaru dissipated the moment it entered the light field.

“It lost power?”

The light had been reduced to the speed of a simple arrow. Swinging his blade, he easily knocked it aside.

Of course, even if it had lost speed, it wasn’t something that could be deflected easily. But that was just a testament to Julius’s masterful swordsmanship. He was able to easily defend against the attacks that followed as well.

“E M T. Absolute nullification magic. Inside this field, all magic loses its strength.”

Since he was still holding hands with Beatrice, Subaru used his free side to point at the tower.

That field was one of three trump cards that Subaru and Beatrice had developed. The third was still incomplete, but it was created with the goal of being able to fight with powerful enemies, the pinnacle of dark magic.

“But it won’t last long. Effectively, this all ends once my mana runs out. And right now I’m like a bucket with a giant hole in the bottom of it.”

“That is an effect that is beyond the pale. I can see the cost of it is also quite heavy. Do you have a plan?!”

“No clue! They noticed us, so we should pull back for now—”

Subaru looked around for a way to retreat as Julius ran over toward him. In such a tense situation, Ram’s quiet voice had almost a translucence to it.

“—They’re looking at Barusu?”

Ram was covering her face with her palm. Subaru wondered for a moment what it was, but then he realized she had activated her clairvoyance—realized that Ram had managed to sync with someone in the tower.

Not just anyone, either. There’s only one person she could aim for there.

“The Sage?!”

“—Ngh.”

There was no response from Ram. Instead, there was a trickle of blood from her right eye socket. It looked like tears of blood flowing from her pink eye.

It’s…not an attack. I don’t know, but it looks like recoil from the clairvoyance.

“Stop it already, dumbass! Right now—”

Subaru tried to stop Ram’s risky spying. He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her slender body into his arms.

“Wait, Barusu!”

“Hell no! You’re going in the carriage! Right now, we—”

He turned around while holding Ram.

—In that moment, the world around them shattered.

“Ah—?”

“—Ngh! We messed up!”

An impossible change occurred in the desert night as Beatrice’s voice rang out.

“The E M T frayed the warped space!”

“What does that—?”

Subaru couldn’t finish his question as he felt a floating sensation and his feet left the ground.

The world twisted chaotically, fraying and breaking apart like a sheet of paper being torn to pieces. Cracks formed in the ground and sky, swallowing up the carriage, Subaru, and everyone else.

“Crap…Emilia?!”

“Subaru—”

Falling into sudden darkness, Subaru shouted as a feeling of weightlessness came over him.

He couldn't tell up from down or right from left or where the carriage was. But he could hear Emilia's distant, oh so distant response to his shout.

"This is—"

Before he could finish saying it was bad, Subaru was spat out on the other side of the shattered sky.

4

—In the distance, the boundary between the field of flowers and the desert collapsed, and a shadow saw the small band swallowed in the shattering.

Watching from the distance, the shadow slithered in the darkness of the tower.

Leaving the window it had been standing at, the shadow stepped on the stone floor and descended the spiral staircase.

The shadow's footsteps were slow, but they gradually picked up speed, getting restless.

"—I found you."

It was a hoarse, ragged murmur, like a voice that had not spoken in years. But there was no one who would mistake the emotion in that voice for joy.

"I found you."

—That much was certain.

CHAPTER 4

TRUST ON THE SANDS

1

—Subaru was falling deep, deep into a rift, unable to reach anything.

“

Firing back at the merciless insult, Subaru raised his head while coughing up sand again. This time he was more careful, making sure not to slip into the sand again while standing up.

"This is…"

"This low a temperature without a breeze… It's likely somewhere belowground."

As he looked around the darkness surrounding them, a lantern glowing with a white light—an emergency lantern with ragmite ore inside it—was suddenly thrust in front of him.

Taking the handle, he could finally clearly see the other person with him.

"—Ram?"

"Who else would it be? And don't say something stupid like Rem."

"You look alike, but the aura you exude is similar and yet utterly different… How is your body doing? The exhaustion from using clairvoyance, and there was blood seeping out of your eye, too…"

"Hah! How awfully gentlemanly of you. But save your concerns for cute little Ram for later."

Ram pointed with her chin at their surroundings. Following her lead, Subaru pointed the lantern around them and gulped when he saw the situation.

They were in a cave. It was cool inside, and there was a high ceiling overhead. It was like a maze of sand.

"You were saying it was underground before…"

"If Lady Beatrice's words before we were separated are to be believed, then the cause was the rift in space."

"So we were sent flying through a warp…and separated? Right, what about everyone else?"

Listening to Ram's calm analysis, Subaru was finally able to catch back up to the situation he was in. Swinging the lantern left and right, he looked for anyone else nearby.

"As I said, we've been separated. The effect of your magic nullifying the deception of the dunes. I cannot say whether this is the correct path to the tower or if we have fallen into a timeless interdimensional rift."

"How can you be so calm?! And why are the two of us together…?"

"You're asking me that?"

Subaru's face went pale, and he held his breath when he heard her calm voice.

He remembered what had just happened, Beatrice shouting and the world shattering around him. In that moment, Subaru had reflexively held on to Ram.

And then the party had been swallowed up by the rift in the sky, and when he woke up—

"The two of us were here together…"

"I can't see Lady Emilia or Lady Beatrice… You really stepped in it this time."

"This isn't really the time for that! We need to meet up with everyone… No! Rem!"

"

“…My bad. Sorry. I was being stupid. I’m the worst.”

“…Just like always. If you spent every waking moment apologizing for everything you did wrong, you would never get anything done. Cut the pointless drivel.”

“Yeah…sorry.”

Taking that insult as Ram’s way of reconciling, Subaru apologized one last time.

“It’s mere consolation, but I feel a faint connection to Rem. At the very least, she is still alive.”

“A connection… Right, synesthesia!”

Hearing that, Subaru remembered a nostalgic word.

When the Petelgeuse-led witch cultists were after Emilia and the others, Rem had been able to sense that Ram was in danger at the mansion.

“Any chance you could use that feeling to figure out where Rem is?”

“Like I said, the connection is faint. All I can do is sense that she’s sleeping. And the wavelength of my clairvoyance does not overlap with Lady Emilia or the others, so I can’t say whether they are safe, either.”

“I see. A safety check with clairvoyance… So you can’t connect with anyone?”

“Strictly speaking, there is one other I can connect with. Not that there is any point in it, though.”

Subaru couldn’t understand what she meant by there not being a point in confirming the safety of any comrades who had been separated from them. But that question soon answered itself.

“—From the look of things, I guess you’re up now, Natsuki.”

Subaru shrank back when a light shone on him out of the corner of his eye. But its gentle waving wasn’t threatening him, and he quickly realized it was the light of another lantern.

Finally, the outline of a person holding it became clear enough for him to make out.

“…Anastasia…and Patlash?”

Slowly, the two of them appeared together. Patlash’s black scales made it seem like she emerged from the darkness itself as she approached, and Anastasia was riding on Patlash’s back in her white outfit.

Anastasia smiled down at Subaru.

“Sorry for borrowing Patlash without permission. But I’m a

little too helpless to be going around exploring on my own."

"That's…fine, but…I thought it was just the two of us, Ram?"

"I don't recall ever saying it was just the two of us."

Subaru stared over at Ram, but she feigned ignorance, just blaming it on Subaru's own assumptions.

"Lady Anastasia, thank you for going out to check. Was there anything of note around us?"

"Mmm, I checked a little deeper, but I couldn't find anyone else. It seems like the three of us…and Patlash were the only ones sent here."

"…I see."

While Subaru had been unconscious, the two of them had apparently split up tasks. It was easy enough to guess how Ram was feeling after hearing Anastasia's report.

There wasn't a thing for Subaru to do about his worry for Rem, either, but…

"But it's at least good news that you're safe, Anastasia. And also my Patlash."

"Yes, it's not all bad news. It's important to recognize the good things, too. Honestly, it was a big help that Patlash was here—and that she's willing to listen."

Patlash lowered her head when Subaru walked over, happy to see him again. Patting her neck, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief at safely reuniting with his trusty steed.

"So is this everyone then? Just four people?"

"If you're counting Patlash as a person, then yeah. There's no reason for Emilia or the others to be hiding… Well, I guess Meili might."

"What, you mean try to escape in all the confusion? I mean, I guess I can't rule it out, but."

As Meili flashed through his head, Subaru thought about her.

Thanks to his death resets, he did know that she had the sandworm under her control to fall back on as a last resort. But he had no way of knowing what she intended it to be used for. It might have just been setting herself up to be able to attack them and escape at some point.

"I don't think that's it."

"You hope? Or do you fully trust a girl who already tried to kill you once?"

"Just call it a heartfelt prayer. Anyway, what's going on

deeper?”

Setting Meili aside, Subaru wanted to hear a bit more detail about what Anastasia found while looking around. Ram had deduced they were somewhere underground from their surroundings, but—

“I’m of the same opinion. It’s clearly colder here than out on the sands at night…and the air is heavy, so it’s hard to imagine we’re somewhere outside of Auguria.”

“So the miasma is still thick in the air? Not exactly a great place to be in any sense then.”

“We’re underneath the sands, right? I don’t want to imagine it, but it’s entirely possible this is a sandworm nest.”

“Ugh. If it is, that would be really bad.”

Subaru’s expression twitched as Ram touched the sand wall.

They had seen sandworms that moved underground already, so Subaru couldn’t just laugh off the possibility. Considering how big the sandworm Meili had controlled was, it was certainly possible for a sandworm to make the cavern they were in, too.

In the worst case, they might just end up face-to-face with a sandworm down there.

“Also, I can sense some real malice in this party build! There’s not a single person who can fight here!”

“Unabashedly counting yourself among the noncombat members despite being Lady Emilia’s knight… He’s broken, Lady Anastasia.”

“Just call it knowing my limits. My trusty whip isn’t powerful enough for me to start thinking I’m anything special without Beako.”

Even just on the level of self-defense, they were a gathering of party members who were all lacking in combat ability. Ram had her limitations, and Subaru without Beatrice went without saying.

“Incidentally, what of Lady Beatrice? You’re contracted with her, so can’t you feel a link with her?”

“Unfortunately, while our hearts are strongly bound together, it’s more in the sense of a deep emotional bond.”

“You’re useless.”

“Who asked you?!”

Sticking out his tongue at Ram’s sigh, Subaru turned to Anastasia. Seeing her calm expression, he whispered in her ear.

“And what about you? Can you fight?”

“—If push comes to shove. But it means shaving away at Anna’s life. That’s something I want to avoid if at all possible. So I’ve got big hopes for you.”

“You’re only gonna get let down with hopes like that. For better or for worse.”

Subaru snorted as Foxidna spoke plainly for once.

Either way, though, they had confirmed the situation they were in. And also the fact that they couldn’t afford to just sit around waiting, either.

“There is nothing to be gained by just waiting here. We should search for Rem and Lady Emilia. Fortunately, we have light thanks to Lady Anastasia, so we can keep going forward.”

“More thanks to the emergency bag Natsuki prepared than me. I grabbed that before the carriage was swallowed up, so we have lights, a knife, and some emergency rations.”

Anastasia pointed to the bag hanging from Patlash’s saddle. It was one of the ones that Subaru had prepared in case of an emergency before they left.

“There’s nothing better than not needing an emergency kit, but it’s important to have options when things go wrong. That’s why you always make sure to confirm where the emergency exits are in a building you’ve never been in before, too.”

“For once, a great achievement by Barusu. As a reward, I’ll allow you to hold the lantern. Be sure to keep a brisk pace.”

“Sure, sure… You call this a reward?”

While Subaru took the lantern, Ram and Anastasia got onto Patlash.

No matter how he thought about it, he’d basically been relegated to the position of foot servant.

“Three people riding is just… If Ram and I squeezed in, you could maybe fit?”

“No, if he got that close, Barusu would start breathing raggedly in excitement.”

“Don’t think I’m going to stay quiet forever! If you’re going to be like that, I’ll just imagine something even more amazing! That’s not a threat, either! Don’t underestimate youth!”

Unwilling to admit defeat, Subaru snorted at their reactions and started walking.

He headed into the cavern, setting out beyond the darkness to meet back up with the rest of his comrades.

The lighthearted banter that didn't fit the situation was merely a front in order for the two of them to avoid dealing with the unease they were feeling.

Both Subaru and Ram realized that, but neither commented on it.

2

"It…sort of feels like a breeze, but sort of not."

"…No, there is a breeze. But judging by the strength of it, it will be quite a ways farther before this path connects to aboveground."

Subaru licked his fingertip and held it up to sense the breeze, and Ram's pink eyes narrowed.

Trusting the words of the wind magic user, Subaru felt disheartened at the length of the road ahead of them.

—It had already been an hour since they set out, but it was incredibly difficult to walk on the ground in the sand cavern.

Walking alongside Patlash, who was used to the sand, Subaru ignored the discomfort of all the sand in his boots. From the experience he had gotten walking on the sand the past few days, he was managing to get by without slowing down too much.

But there was no avoiding the sand sapping his endurance, so they were taking breaks at regular intervals, and Ram was searching for the others with her clairvoyance during those breaks.

"—No good. Nothing is in range for me. All I can see is Barusu's land dragon's vision."

"You're on the same wavelength as Patlash? …I guess that makes sense."

Though they were different species, Ram and Patlash were similar in their haughtiness. But it was a little inconvenient that the only one she could connect with was the dragon who was already with them.

"Lady Emilia and Julius can communicate with lesser spirits, so they should not get lost. On that point at least, I do have to wonder about the maliciousness of this grouping."

"Guidance from lesser spirits? Yeah, Emilia-tan tends to use that pretty effectively. In my case, the connection with Beako is too strong, and it scares off the lesser spirits, so I can't really use it."

"You are just a half-baked mage born of Lady Beatrice's pity

after all. I didn't get my hopes up."

"Grrr…"

There was nothing he could say in response to being called useless for gathering information, so he didn't try. In the end, it just meant that the people who could be counted on to fight could also rely on their abilities in other areas as well.

"She's hiding it behind a tough front now, but right after we got sent here and before you woke up, Ram was pretty panicky about not being able to find Rem."

"…That so…?"

"You're doing fine in terms of keeping Ram calm. You aren't useless at all."

While Ram was searching with her clairvoyance, Anastasia quietly mentioned what had happened right after they had been separated from everyone else.

Considering how Ram felt, what Subaru had said earlier really was the worst.

Subaru had seen how devoted Ram was in going to take care of her little sister that she couldn't remember every day during the past year. Even if someone else doubted her feelings, Subaru at least should not have doubted her.

"Reflect on your mistakes and make the most of them. It's the same in life as it is in business. And you're the kind of guy who can do that, aren't ya?"

"…Don't change gears on me and start saying nice stuff like that. The witch who made you tried to ensnare me with a similar sort of setup."

"Ensnare, huh? I'd appreciate it if you could start thinking of me as a different person from that witch. If you're too stubborn, the girls will never fall for you. Consider that a genuine bit of advice from me."

"I don't know any other way to go at things. But I'll make a mental note of that."

With that advice on social grace from an artificial spirit, their group continued deeper and deeper into the cavern.

As they went along, the mental stress of walking through a labyrinth of sand where everything looked exactly the same grew ever more intense. Their unease and anxiety at the lack of progress continued to grow, but also there was something bothering Subaru.

"Even though we were on guard about this possibly being a

demon beast nest…we haven't run into a single one."

"That has been bothering me as well."

Subaru kicked the ground as Ram agreed.

It wasn't just that they had not run into any while moving through the cavern. Ram had not caught any with her clairvoyance, either. It was an ominous sort of sign. As if the space they were in really was entirely shut off from the rest of the world.

"There's no way this is actually some rift in space that's not connected to anywhere, right?"

"If it is, then where is the wind that we've been following coming from? Do you think we're in the nostril of a giant demon beast and that's just its breathing?"

"The fact that I can't actually deny that is scary."

He had seen the world shattering around him with his own eyes. After that, whatever might happen wouldn't be a shock. Wherever the rift they were in connected to should not be that surprising.

"You are free to get scared all you want, coward, but keep your stupid ideas to yourself, please."

Ram's cold, logical voice rejected the wretchedness that Subaru felt when he realized they were trapped in a dead end.

"Eh?"

"Hold up the lamp— The path."

Turning around frantically at what Ram said, Subaru held the lantern up and lit the path in front of them.

Even if you say that, it's just the same straight path we've been following the whole time.

In other words, there wasn't anything new to be—

"—A fork in the road."

Right in front of them, the straight path they had been walking through the sand divided into two paths.

The fork was nice and neat; there was no notable difference between right and left. It looked like there wasn't anything to base a decision on other than instinct, but—

"It looks like we are being told to figure it out. What shall we do?"

"As best I know, Zhuge Liang said to always go right in situations like this."

"Who's that?"

He could remember that, according to behavioral studies,

humans tended to unconsciously go left when they were confused. It was probably something to do with a bunch of complex factors like dominant eye or leg or stuff like that.

Subaru had picked up a wealth of pointless facts, but that was a useful one. Or at least he thought so.

“I always want to check the right path first. That’s my justice!”

“You really seem to trust this Zhuge Liang.”

“Who’s that?”

Ram’s eyes narrowed, and Anastasia cocked her head again.

From just their exchange, it might have sounded like they were just screwing around, but all three of them had serious looks on their faces.

It was already more than two hours since they had been separated from the others.

They had managed to calm down before, but it was time enough for the anxiety and unease to start making waves again. And just at that moment, there was a fork in the path. Honestly, considering how anxious he was feeling, he wanted to start moving again as soon as possible.

“We have no way of deciding. But I don’t really like the idea of relying on Zhuge Liang…”

“For now, let’s just go with what Natsuki wants. The right one, yeah?”

Neither Ram nor Anastasia had enough reason to say otherwise with Subaru wanting to go right. And all three of them shared the desire to get out of their maze of sand and meet back up with everyone else as soon as possible.

“

then let's move. Time is money."

"One of Hoshin's sayings, was it? —Okay then, let's go. Same formation as before, and let's be careful."

Ram and Anastasia nodded.

Following the great strategist Zhuge Liang's teaching, the noncombatant party resumed their march. They headed down the right path, believing that their comrades awaited them at the other end.

"Honestly, a fork in the road with no hint at all is mean, but it at least rules out the hell of an infinite loop… I guess this really is one of the Sage's traps?"

"If so, how much time must have been spent digging a hole like this underground? But it is a shut-in pretending to be a hermit, after all. There would be plenty of time in all those years, I suppose."

"Big Sis, that's a pretty harsh evaluation of the Sage."

But he could understand her hostile stance toward the Sage, too. If the sand time and the garden of demon beasts and this labyrinth were all set up by the Sage, then *Sinister* was probably a better title.

"At this rate, I'm not going to be doing anything other than complaining when we finally do meet this Sage."

"Agreed. After doing all this, if they're still not willing to help, then I won't have any choice. Worst case, I'll have no choice but to string them up and make them talk."

"I'm not sure what to say about your grave-robbing approach to things."

"If there's something I want, I take the measures needed to get it. This is not some child's game."

Her genuine and unshakable resolve was recognizable in her strong tone.

That was a resolve that Subaru would need to have as well. Not the resolve to dirty his hands for Rem's sake, but the resolve to not hesitate, to take the steps he needed to get the result he wanted.

"In the end, the thing I have to do is the same as always. I've never held back before."

Subaru clenched his fist and tried to fire himself up.

Just then—

"Patlash?"

Suddenly, Patlash stretched her neck and rubbed her nose against Subaru's shoulder. It wasn't as if she had suddenly felt the

urge to cuddle up with him. There was another reason.

"—A door?"

Raising the lantern, Subaru saw an imposing piece of iron that filled the entirety of the sandy passage. It was an iron wall that blocked the entire passage from ground to ceiling.

The group pressed forward to right in front of the wall and started examining the mass of metal in detail.

"This thing's big, and it looks thick… Can we move it?"

"…That's blocking the whole path, so probably not easily. And Natsuki?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do you think this is a door? It just looks like a metal wall to me."

"Eh?"

Subaru caught his breath as Anastasia cocked her head while looking at the same mass of metal as he was. Ram nodded as well.

"It just looks like a bunch of scrap metal in our way. Even with as bad as your eyes are, Barusu, that is an odd conclusion."

"I mean, I can't really explain it, either. It just felt like a door to me, I guess…"

Subaru looked at the metal mass—no, the metal door—again.

There was no other reason than what he gave them already. Just for some reason, he had naturally perceived it as a door.

And trying to figure out why, he reached out and touched it—

"—Ah."

Just then, when Subaru touched the door, it seemed to glow faintly, and then it disappeared. It was as if it had never been blocking their way. There were not even any traces of it left in the sand on the ground.

"What was that…? Did you do something, Natsuki?"

"I mean, you saw it, right? All I did was touch it. I didn't do anything else. I have no idea what happened."

Looking at his hand and back where the door had been, Subaru was shaken as he answered Anastasia.

He had no idea what had happened or what that door even was.

"—The important point isn't what happened, it's what we do now."

Ram's quiet voice put a halt on Subaru's confusion. As the other two looked at her, she was looking down the passage beyond where the door had been.

“There was a wall…or rather a door blocking our path. And it opened. The passage continues this way. So do we continue this way or go back to the fork?”

“

Subaru heaved a sigh as Ram poked fun at his bond with Patlash, then started walking again.

He reflected on the resolution he had just voiced.

—Right now we just have to roll the dice.

3

At least he worked himself up thinking that, but after proceeding a short distance past the door…

"—A second door. And it disappeared again."

Subaru watched as another iron door glowed and disappeared before his eyes.

It happened right after Subaru touched it. It was hard to believe he had just awakened to some new ability, so the only other explanation was they were designed to do that, but…

"What's the point of a door in a dungeon that doesn't actually block anything?"

Subaru was at a loss trying to explain the purpose of having a door like that.

It wasn't dividing up rooms or anything, so there was little reason in having a door that anyone could open. The obvious reason to have one was to block anyone trying to get through, and yet…

"It doesn't feel like it because we haven't run into any yet, but maybe it's something to stop demon beasts."

"Demon beasts… So like the barrier? I guess I could understand that, but…"

"Maybe demon beasts just can't open it, but if a person touches it, the path opens up… Still, that'd be a little loose on security when it comes to closing the door behind you— If there's a third one, we should have someone other than you touch it."

Anastasia's eyes narrowed as she hypothesized about the point of the door. There was just too little to go on, though, so it was hard to come up with a convincing explanation.

And what bothered Subaru more wasn't the mysterious doors.

"

“My body’s really heavy…”

Wiping away the sticky sweat in annoyance, Subaru slowly started walking again, dragging his feet out of the sand.

Ram wasn’t the only one being weakened by the miasma. Subaru and Anastasia were feeling it, too. Their moods and their bodies were getting heavier. Every cell in their bodies, the blood flowing through their veins, the drumbeat of their hearts, it was all telling them to get out as soon as possible.

“

“But—”

“Natsuki, just leave it be.”

He understood Ram’s feelings, but Subaru was annoyed at her prickly attitude. Sensing that, Anastasia shifted, blocking Ram from his gaze.

“I understand how you’re feeling, but Ram’s exhausted. Nothing good ever comes from trying to talk to someone when your heart’s worn down to the nub, right?”

“

There was no way the door could answer him, but Subaru still screamed and violently slammed his arms and feet against it. It didn't budge. All that happened was the impacts reverberated in his bones, making him suffer more.

—After having passed through the third door in the labyrinth, they were stopped cold by the fourth.

So much anxiety and frustration had been building amid their unchanging surroundings, but it would have been fine at least if the door had opened. Having his free pass revoked and making all the walking so far meaningless caused Subaru's frustration to explode.

Subaru threw the lantern down and pushed against the door, desperately trying to force it open. But almost as if it were mocking him, the cold metallic door refused to yield.

It felt like the faint, slender thread of hope that had been keeping Subaru going had been mercilessly cut.

"Damn it, damn it…piece of shit!"

"Natsuki, that's enough… This is just a dead end."

"Gee, I couldn't tell!"

Anastasia tapped his shoulder, but Subaru brushed off her arm with a furious shout. Kicking the sand wall to vent his irritation, the weak outer layer crumbled, creating a cloud of sand.

There's nothing we can do. I know already. There's nothing I can do but pound sand.

"…Tch…"

"—Hey."

Spinning at that sound, Subaru glared at Ram, who was sitting alone on top of Patlash. Something about how her face looked in the darkness, the way she was looking down at him, pissed him off.

"You've been at it a while now, but what's your problem?"

"Nothing."

"Don't treat me like an idiot! I asked you what your problem is!"

Subaru raised his voice violently as he kicked the lantern across the ground. It slammed into the sand wall, and the glass covering the ragmite ore shattered, scattering fragments across the sand.

But Subaru didn't pay any attention to that. He could only see Ram, who he thought was disrespecting him.

"I'm here working my ass off, and you're sitting up there chirping at me! What are you trying to do?!"

"Nothing at all. It's a dead end. The path we chose was wrong.

There's nothing for me to say. It is what it is."

"Liar! Do you think I'm stupid? If you don't want to say it, then keep the whole thing to yourself! What's the point of making a shit show and then acting like it wasn't anything? How dumb can you be!"

In response to Ram's cool attitude, Subaru's fever just grew.

We've been separated from everyone else, walking for hours, and we hit a dead end. She's being too unfair. I've been doing my best here. She's got no right to look down on me.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down, both of you. There's no need to—"

"Shut your goddamn mouth! Ram and I are talking right now!"

Anastasia tried to mediate, but Subaru mercilessly brushed her off. Subaru's expression was wrath made manifest as he glared at Ram.

"If you want to talk shit, then start talking! Go on, I'm all ears!"

"—You're awfully keen to keep advancing, aren't you?"

"Damn straight! Why the hell do you think we came here? To meet the Sage! That's why I'm working so goddamn hard! What of it?!"

"Wrong. We didn't come here to meet the Sage."

"Huh?"

"The reason we came here is to awaken Rem."

Ram was looking Subaru straight in the eye as she asserted that. Even Subaru with his thoughts seething was slightly overwhelmed by the sharpness of her eyes.

But doesn't meeting the Sage equal saving Rem?

"They're not the same thing. Saving Rem is more important, and seeing the Sage is secondary to that. You've got the order of precedence wrong. You've got things flipped."

"

She hit him with what happened in the instant the world shattered, when he had reflexively held on to Ram.

"I'm sure you just had your hands full with what was going on immediately around you. That's how you always are. That's how it always goes, and it's not like you really cared about Rem. Your head was just filled with thoughts about Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice. What a man you are. Poor Rem."

"…Shut your mouth…"

"Rem believed in you, didn't she? Or was that just another of your convenient explanations? Just running your mouth to get by? Just your bad habit of saying whatever it takes to get women to trust you? Poor Lady Emilia and Lady Beatrice, too. Being tricked by a man like you!"

"Shut your goddamn mouth!"

"No, I won't! Because it's not like you actually care at all about Rem!"

"—Don't you dare!"

The world turned red, and his head erupted in flames.

Look at her, so smug and looking down on me, spouting random shit. I oughtta drag her off her goddamn high horse.

"Invisible Providence!"

"Gh, ah?!"

Giving in to the dark feelings taking over his head, Subaru unleashed it.

The black hand cheered rapturously as it grabbed the girl spouting her misguided insults from the dragon's back and dragged her down onto the sand.

Looking down on Ram, who couldn't figure out what was happening, Subaru gnashed his teeth.

"Don't play with me."

You think I don't care about Rem? You think this is some sick joke?

In a fit of rage, his head was burning as he leaned over her slender body—

"—Ugh."

Subaru wrapped both his hands around her neck and started throttling her with all his strength. His fingers bit into her small neck. He could feel her bones creaking under his hands.

"…Ah…ugh…"

Ram groaned as Subaru straddled her and was strangling her.

Her face warped in pain, and saliva started to dribble from the corner of her lips. Her red tongue moved in her mouth as she struggled to get free, but Subaru had pinned her shoulders with his knees, taking a perfect mount, so even Ram couldn't fight back.

You'll regret what you said about me when you stop breathing! You'll regret saying that shit about me! How dare you hurt me!

"It's your fault. You. You!"

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you!

As all little resentments piled up and overflowed, Ram's face drained of color.

"Die. It makes me sick that an asshole like you looks the same as Rem!"

"

“I’ll gouge out that face of yours so there’s no one else who looks like Rem in this world.”

“Stupidity is a disease caught by spending too much time talking to idiots— So shut up and die before you pass it to me.”

Subaru’s eyes were bloodshot from the sand, and Ram’s lips curled into a bloody, lethal smile. The two of them carefully measured their distances, facing off against each other in the circular passage.

It was a lit powder keg, and neither of them would make it out unscathed—

“—All right, that’s enough.”

—But the fuse was snuffed out.

“

Foxidna is my guide to the watchtower, and there's still a good chance she'll be useful to me. Unlike Ram, who was useless and just kept pissing me off, she's a piece that would be a problem to lose.

"…Fine, I'll go along with your smooth talk."

"That's good. I knew you were a smart one. That's a relief."

Anastasia smiled thinly as she made a show of breathing a sigh of relief. Then she stepped awkwardly across the sand toward Subaru, holding out her white hand.

"Let's shake on it. A reconciliation—and to working together going forward."

"

At the same time, a dark smile crossed Subaru's lips.

"In that case…"

Now.

While she was saying something, before she could raise the knife, he poured strength into the invisible hand. The black palm covered her thin neck and started to twist—

—Just before he could do it, though, a blade of wind split her body in half from behind.

"

“Nooo…”

Violently grabbing Anastasia’s face, he forcefully pulled her off him. She was sobbing and screaming something as Subaru finally got her away and threw her down to the ground.

Her small upper body fell into a puddle of her own blood.

“Don’t…leave me…”

That soft murmur that almost sounded like a drowning voice was her last.

Subaru could no longer hear her voice. It was destined from the moment she was cut, but death had finally caught up to her. Subaru was overwhelmed by a tremendous nausea and started heaving.

“Geh! Ugh! Gah-ha! Geh-hoh-hoh! Haaah…”

Expelling what little was left in his stomach, he wiped the yellowish vomit from his mouth with his sleeve. It wasn’t the time to just hang his head. The one who had just killed Anastasia was—

“—Barusu.”

“Just die already.”

There was a shadow in the light of the lantern on the ground. It was Ram, her whole upper body stained in blood. The knife had cut deeply through her chest, but she was still alive.

Only just barely. She killed Anastasia on tenacity alone, and now she’s after me—

“Just die and leave me out of it…”

Struggling to breathe, Subaru looked around for his whip. But he couldn’t find it. And while he was searching, Ram approached him with faltering steps.

The whip won’t make it. So there’s just one other choice.

“Invisible Provide—?!”

The trump card he had relied on several times already.

Just as he tried to fall back on its power again, he suddenly felt an intense pain in his eye.

“Gah?! Ahhh?! Ohhhh?!”

A pain like a burning needle piercing his skull made his eyes roll backward in their sockets. The side effect of using his ability scorched his mind, and he grabbed his head and rolled around the sand while tears of blood seeped from his eyes.

It felt like a hellish feast was starting inside his head, and all his nerves started boiling. He couldn’t escape the pain.

“Ahhh! Ghhhh! Ughhhhh?!”

As Subaru writhed in pain, Ram held up her bloody wand while

barely clinging to life and pointed it at him.

Subaru rolled into Anastasia's pool of blood, getting her viscera all over himself while still writhing in pain. Ram's lips slowly moved as she cast her spell.

And, finishing the incantation, just as the blade of wind was about to tear into Subaru—

"

“Patlash?”

He called to her, but his trusty steed didn’t obey.

In fact, she didn’t even turn to look at him. She was just sitting comfortably on the sand, breathing heavily next to Subaru.

Seeing that, realizing that he was being ignored, Subaru’s rage started growing.

“Hey, Patlash. You listening to me? Hey!”

It was a similar sort of annoyance to what he had felt with Ram and Anastasia. His negative emotions were amplifying at a speed far greater than normal, and he erupted at the land dragon that refused to answer him.

“Hey, look at me, asshole! Who do you think I am?!”

“

Her yellow reptilian eyes were filled with a sharp, violent—

"Sto—"

Patlash's jaw opening right in front of his face was the last thing he saw.

He could hear the sound of his body being chewed until the moment his consciousness was extinguished. Even after his head was shattered and his ears were no more.

How was he hearing it? It was strange and didn't make any sense, but he couldn't laugh at it. He didn't have a mouth to laugh —or any life left, either. So he didn't laugh or even do anything.

—And so Subaru Natsuki died, eaten by his partner.

5

—His consciousness continued hearing the sound of things breaking.

Bones being chewed, his brain being crushed, his eyes bursting and splattering like overripe grapes.

His skull. It was his skull that shattered. And inside, all those important things jumbled together.

It all combined as his consciousness and memories turned into the color of flesh and transformed into vomit.

It was a head-splitting pain— As he thought that, his consciousness sneered at him.

Your head is already split, and everything inside it is already splattered. You lost the part that lets you feel pain a while back already, so what are you talking about?

His brain for storing memories was crushed, his organ for thinking destroyed, and all the crucial bits for just maintaining vital functions had burst. What was there other than death?

People who ended up like that died. So naturally, Subaru Natsuki had also—

"—rusu. Barusu. Get ahold of yourself."

His untethered consciousness was grabbed by the root and forcibly dragged to a bright place.

When he got back, the first thing he sensed was someone else calling his name. It wasn't just a voice. He could feel a gentle

slapping on his cheek. And the gravelly feel of sand in his mouth.

“Barusu, wake up already. Don’t make me burn away your eyelids.”

“—Ngh.”

Hearing such a frightening threat as the first thing upon waking, his consciousness quickly surfaced.

Guided by that voice, his consciousness rose from a sea of darkness, breaking the water’s surface—

“—Are you up, Barusu?”

Right in front of him, he saw Ram’s face, her pink eyes narrowing.

“

same for others as well. For his comrades and friends or anyone else.

He was scared of dying himself, but the thought of someone he knew dying was enough to tear at his heart.

—All the more so with how gruesome Ram's death had been. That was the worst shock of all—and something he had never experienced before.

"…Ogh, geh, geh-hoh, gah-ha."

He desperately tried not to remember it, but that was no different than trying to remember it.

Ram's gory fate, trusty Patlash's vicious act. The more he tried to forget them, the more vividly he saw the clumps of pink hair sticking out of the land dragon's fangs and the remnants of her head lying on the ground.

As a result, he couldn't hold back the nausea welling up inside him, and he vomited into the sand.

But his stomach and throat couldn't recover from the shock of that death. He just hunched over, spasming as drool slipped from his mouth.

"…All that after waking up? How pathetic."

A cold voice fell on Subaru as he bent over on all fours in the sand, desperately gasping. Ram was right beside him, looking down at him. Her cold attitude just reminded him of their argument right before he died.

Remembering the rage and murderousness that had swelled in him for no reason, the argument that had turned into a fight to the death…the way he had been overcome by his impulses, his chest ached, and he got scared.

What if something like that happened again—?

"Don't you dare bite down."

"—Ngh."

With that one preface, Ram held his chin with her finger.

Subaru froze in surprise, but paying that no heed, Ram opened his mouth, and looking bored, she stuck her white finger down his throat.

"…?! Oh, eough."

"I knew you were a bungler through and through, but if you can't even do this much, how are you any better than a baby."

Subaru's throat was violently assaulted.

But because of that, his stomach and throat that had only been

spasming adapted to that new shock and naturally ejected the nausea that was welling up inside him.

All that came out was gastric juices and saliva, but it made Subaru feel far better than before he had been able to get anything out.

“Eh-hoh, geh-ha…haah…huu… Sorry… I’m okay now…”

“Oh? Well, I’m gwad you were able to feel bwetter.”

“Y-you…”

Subaru wiped his mouth on his sleeve as Ram shrugged and responded with baby talk.

He had his complaints with that attitude, but it was true that his inability to perform that natural bodily function put him on the same level as a nursing baby. He didn’t have any ground to stand on to argue with Ram’s hand still gently patting his back.

It was a hard-to-understand, awkward sort of thoughtfulness.

“You can stop with the hand. More importantly, this is…”

“You remember the light from the watchtower and the crack in space shattering, right? We were swallowed up in that fissure and ended up thrown out here.”

Ram gestured at the surroundings with her chin as Subaru escaped her hand on his back. Hearing that, Subaru was struck by a surprise that was late to register.

“

“You look pathetic.”

Subaru’s face had stiffened as he realized what had happened when Ram’s finger suddenly touched him. Looking toward that warmth, he saw Ram nodding, her expression unchanged.

“Don’t get flustered. Just calm down. What happened, happened. Right now, we have to keep our heads about us and accept the situation we are in. Though that might be asking a bit much of you.”

“

“—What?”

Seeing Subaru looking at her, Ram furrowed her brow dubiously.

Looking into her pink eyes, Subaru took a deep breath.

“Ram, the reason I grabbed you when this happened is because I was holding on to you before the world started shattering and because in that moment you were the weakest person and the person closest to me, and um…”

“

“They are separated for the most part. Other than you and me and… Ah, looks like they’re back now.”

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve while hating himself for the shamelessness of asking a question he already knew the answer to.

Looking up, the light of the lantern Ram was holding ran into another lantern’s light. Anastasia and Patlash had come back after looking around their surroundings.

—Subaru’s heart shuddered at the gallant and menacing visage of the land dragon that appeared in the light.

“How stupid can I be…”

Gripping his own chest strongly, Subaru gritted his teeth, swallowing the weakness that was welling up inside him.

There was no reason for him to let himself be held back by that crazy friction now. The fact that he had been killed by Patlash had left a deep, deep scar on his heart.

Still, he had come face-to-face with people who had killed him plenty of times before.

“Right, it was the same with Rem and Ram, too. At first…”

At this point, Ram had even shown him a bit of kindness, even if it could be a bit difficult to understand. And Rem had done so much to support him, had saved him from despair.

Their relationships had been bad at first, and they had both not only tried to kill him, but even actually killed him before.

Compared to that, what had just happened with Patlash wasn’t even a result of her real feelings.

“—Thank goodness. So you’re awake, Natsuki.”

“Thank you for going to look around. Did you find anything?”

Ram and Anastasia started talking.

They were going to start discussing what to do going forward and how to get through the sand labyrinth. He needed to join in and let them know. To make sure that tragedy didn’t happen again.

“

He swallowed his fear and took a deep breath. In order to correct the mistakes he had made in his previous round, in order to change things this time.

“

CHAPTER 5

THE WATCHTOWER GUARDIAN

1

"—Anastasia, watch out, the ceiling is low here."

"Got it. Thanks."

"Ram, the footing here is a bit rough. It should be okay for Patlash, but be careful."

"…Understood…"

"Right, are you getting cold, Ram? You can take my cloak if you need it."

"

It wasn’t as if he was trying to butter them up to avoid what happened the last time he died. He could tell that was the sort of abnormality that wouldn’t just happen out of nowhere.

But he was genuinely worried about them.

This feeling is probably not unrelated to having just seen them die before my eyes.

“

fork in the road before."

"Though you did give Zhuge Liang a hard time up there."

Both Anastasia and Ram had their guesses at the cause of Subaru's change. He couldn't do anything other than scratch his cheek vaguely.

—On what was now his second time searching the labyrinth of sand, they had already reached the problematic crossroads, and this time they had gone left instead of right.

Subaru didn't imagine he had done a particularly good job of naturally guiding the consensus to the left side. But the both of them had been willing to go along because of how desperate he had been.

If we went right, it would have meant being driven mad by the miasma. I don't want to go through that catastrophe ever again.

But there was no guarantee that the left path was safe. Because of that, Subaru was being especially careful and leaving no stone unturned in order to keep everyone out of harm's way.

"Is this disgusting gentleman act a symptom of hitting your head when we were sent here?"

"What?! Is me being considerate really that abnormal to you? I'm not even doing anything different than Julius usually does! Why's it okay for him but not for me?!"

"Julius does it naturally, but when you do it, it's unhealthy… and unnatural."

"Did you call it *unhealthy*?!"

Subaru's eyes widened at that hideous description, but neither of them paid it much mind. He was getting depressed at being ignored like that when Patlash prodded his shoulder with her nose, trying to cheer him up.

"…You're nice. You really are a great partner."

Subaru was ashamed of himself for the brief moment of hesitation he felt when Patlash comforted him.

He tensed up at having gotten Ram and Anastasia suspicious and making Patlash worry about him. *Can you really protect them like this?* Subaru slapped his cheeks and fired himself up again.

For the moment, they needed to clear the sand labyrinth as soon as possible and meet back up with everyone else.

—Having the restart point change after such a short amount of time had been quite disturbing, but there was something that bothered him even more than that.

The fact was that with the reset point having changed, there might be people he wanted to save that he could no longer save. Just like he had been unable to rescue Rem who had had her name and memories eaten. There might be a tragedy befalling one or all of the people who were separated from him.

He was scared of a loss that he couldn't begin to make right with his own life.

"We need to find them again soon…!"

Emilia, Beatrice, Julius, and Meili. And Rem.

He prayed that nothing bad happened to them.

That nothing hurt them while they were somewhere he couldn't reach them.

That was why…

"Keep pushing forward, step by step. But carefully, so that nobody gets hurt. If you notice anything, say something. Anything I can do, I will do."

"…He's a terminal case."

The clash between a desire to hurry up and safety first robbed Subaru's words of their consistency. Ram was exasperated, and Anastasia just flashed a wry smile. Patlash whinnied a little bit.

—I don't know if it's a good thing or not, but we've already come a pretty long way from the fork and still haven't run into any of those stupid metal doors. I think it's probably safe to say we've avoided being driven mad by the overflowing miasma behind them and killing each other.

However, it was hard to imagine that the left path was just the right path all along with no hitches.

"—What? What's that strange smell?"

"Smell?"

Anastasia sniffed the air as Subaru furrowed his brow. Following her lead, he closed his eyes and focused on his nose. He quickly noticed the problematic smell.

The smell coming from down the passage, beyond where their light reached was—

"The smell of something burning."

There was a faint heat in the air coming from down the passage.

Subaru and Anastasia both nodded at Ram's observation. It was the smell of something burning. The simple smell of fire was slipping into their nostrils and making itself known.

“Do you suppose it might just be Lady Emilia carelessly starting a campfire and resting?”

“I agree Emilia-tan might just be careless enough to light a fire and set up camp, but given the situation and the timing, that’s a little too…”

“It’s too suspicious. It is possible it’s Emilia, though.”

In some sense, it was the sort of change they had been wanting after wandering through the unchanging labyrinth. But faced with an actual development, all three of them were cautious.

Not knowing who or what was on the other side, they couldn’t just call out, either. But nothing would change with them just hanging back and staring down a dark corridor.

“—I’m going to go take a look. I’ll turn out the light and be as stealthy as possible, so whatever or whoever it is won’t notice me.”

Turning off the lantern in his hand, Subaru volunteered for the scouting job. Of the three of them, he was the best fit in terms of skills and mindset for the most dangerous task.

“If anything happens, we’ll use you as a distraction. Don’t hold a grudge.”

“If the worst happens, I’ll be sure to curse you from beyond the grave.”

Ram would never say anything so cute as actual encouragement, but Subaru still found it reassuring.

Subaru left them behind and slowly moved forward in the darkness, walking as stealthily as he could.

“

“Ugh! Bleh! Sand again… No, more importantly, why did…?”

Tasting some sand again for the first time in a couple of hours, Subaru spat out what he could as he got himself up. And the grumbles that had started to slip from his lips trailed off as his pupils widened.

—He found himself in a wide space, and a dozen or so yards below where he had been standing before.

“

it got close.

The oiran bear's fiendish claws were about to shred Subaru—

"

“

served more purpose than that. All around him were far more ashy corpses than he could have imagined, scattered wildly everywhere he looked.

The word *crematorium* flashed in Subaru's head.

A demon beast crematorium.

In other words, it was a trap, too— *Sand time and the garden of demon beasts, the miasma path, and now this. They're all grisly traps in order to keep people from reaching the watchtower.*

"

He was a hardened veteran when it came to sudden, unexpected brushes with death. The amount of illogical, incomprehensible deaths he had endured wouldn't let him fall that easily.

He had at least amassed that much experience.

“

wasn’t anything at all to like about it.

“

up and draw aggro for him when he slid down the slope. Not even if he died and reset.

He had no way of guaranteeing they would move forward at the same pace and reach this cavern at the same time. And if they were too fast or too slow, it might just be Subaru getting incinerated instead of the oiran bear.

In that sense, this was a golden opportunity that might never come again.

“

Having decided that, it was clear what he needed to do.

Pulling a second coin out of the purse, a silver coin this time, he tossed it in the opposite direction from the centaur's head. Distract the demon beast and climb the sand mound was his chosen course of action.

Subaru took a path that wasn't too steep while keeping his eyes alert for footing that was less likely to collapse.

"—Ngh."

Suddenly, a wind pushed his body, and he let out a faint grunt. Looking up, he saw that Ram had unleashed a painless, unnatural wind.

I'm doing what you wanted, so why?

—Just then, though, his question was answered by a mass of flames that passed right in front of his eyes.

"

coins to throw, getting them comfortable in his hand. He could feel Ram's and Anastasia's anxious gazes above him, but he couldn't pay attention to that at the moment.

The multiple coins traced a gentle arc through the air, falling at a place far away from the centaur.

Naturally, the centaur's focus shifted toward them, and the hideous demon beast leaped at the obvious feint.

That same flame erupted again, followed by the cry of babies again. And as that shrill sound reverberated in the space, Subaru relied on that to cover his footsteps, quickly scrambling to the sand mound.

One, two steps, as he started to move onto the slope—

"—Ngh!"

The next instant, a fireball grazed his body, exploding on the slope. The aftershock of it sent Subaru flying.

"Gah?!"

His body tumbled as the wave of hot air seared his skin, and the impact of the explosion felt like his whole body had been pummeled. He wasn't fast enough to cover his mouth, and it was impossible not to groan after being hit by that.

Gritting his teeth, Subaru looked up as he steadied himself on the sandy floor with his hands.

"

blown to the side by the wind.

“Guoooo?! Gaah! Damn ittt!”

Doused by the sandy explosion at close range, Subaru rolled across the ground, then used the momentum to leap to his feet and start running without looking back.

“—Ngh! Run run run run run ruuuun!!!”

Subaru intentionally shouted out loud to draw attention to himself as he ran through the cavern. Kicking the cold sand, the centaur’s hooves rang out as it chased after him furiously.

He had not thought through what he was doing. But he had to protect the others. And he couldn’t afford to die, either.

“

“Gh, gah!”

Rolling wildly on the ground as a terrible pain filled his face, Subaru looked up with teary eyes.

The mouth in the center of the humanoid torso opened wide, revealing a toothy hole and unleashing an earsplitting cry that almost sounded like laughter.

—No, it’s laughing.

Laughing at the weak human who lost to a demon beast in a test of knowledge and is now being toyed by its incomparable strength.

“—Invisible Providence.”

As he imagined those thoughts from the centaur, the dark feelings in the corner of his heart took shape.

Giving direction to the black power that responded to his murmur, he prepared to hit back at the demon beast that was casually following its prey.

It’s a one-note trick, but that’s fine. Since it’s a one-note trick that works on anyone the first time.

“

He screamed until he was almost spitting up blood.

There was a massive amount of sand in his mouth, and he was grinding it between his teeth as he writhed, swallowing it to try to stave off the inexplicable pain. He couldn't resist it, though. He was losing to it.

Naturally, of course, his Invisible Providence disappeared immediately.

And when it dissipated, it couldn't interact with the centaur in any way. The demon beast seemed put off by Subaru's sudden change, but it unleashed a fireball to incinerate Subaru on the spot.

The massive fireball robbed the cavern of its cold, heating the world around it.

Just as it was about to turn Subaru Natsuki into ash—

"

Looking closer, Subaru realized it had merged the fireball and the fire lance, creating a fiery weapon.

“

The centaur slammed its front feet into the sand, and using them as a pivot, it forcibly rotated itself before unleashing its hind legs like a catapult.

Those hard metallic hooves gained speed and weight, flying straight at Subaru and the rest—Patlash and Ram and Anastasia, who were all probably close by as well.

It was an explosive leg strength that blew away a whole segment of the cavern, and everyone caught up in it was sent flying all around. Patlash finally let go of Subaru, and he was sent helplessly sprawling across the sand, slamming into the charred corpse of a demon beast in the aftershock of the impact.

“Agh, uuugh…”

The indescribable headache and the centaur’s kick.

Between the combination of internal and external pain assaulting him, Subaru could barely stay conscious. But as his consciousness flickered aimlessly, he could sense impending death approaching.

Destruction, a party wipe, death piled on pointless death.

Those emotionless thoughts swirled in his head, but—

“

Ram and the rest had been caught up in it all because of his stupidity.

So why are you—?

“—It’ll make Rem cry.”

That quiet answer was all Ram said.

Ram was standing there for the sake of the little sister she couldn’t remember, to protect the person her little sister who she couldn’t remember loved.

Subaru couldn’t understand what drove her to go that far.

But even so, there was something he did know.

At this rate, Ram would die. And Subaru would, too. There was no escaping that.

“

her, erasing her feelings, her life, turning everything to ash.

As he saw that scene about to unfold, Subaru cried out at his powerlessness—

“

of hell—a white light pierced it. With a single glance—a white light pierced it—the centaur's very presence—a white light pierced it—no being—a white light pierced it—could help but—a white light pierced it—tremble at—a white light pierced it—the monstrous form and visage—a white light pierced it—befitting the lord of the sands—a white light pierced it—a white light pierced it—a white light pierced it—a white light pierced it—a white light pierced it—a white light pierced it—a white light pierced—a white light pierced—a white light pierced—white light pierced—white light pierced—white light pierced—white light pierced—white light pierced—white light pierced—white light pierced—white light pierced—white light—white light—white light—white light—white light—white light—white light—white light—white light—white light—white light—

"

And at the edge of his vision, he saw someone's leg come into view.

“

In the deep darkness, Subaru didn't have a body. His consciousness was just drifting along helplessly, but it didn't make him feel uneasy or scared.

But the swelling affection, the love, brought some amount of satisfaction to his heart.

However, awareness of that powerful love was—

"You seem to be enjoying yourself."

"This isn't a joke. Do you think I'll stand by while you get proud of yourself just because you got a little bit lucky, and then get ahead of yourself immediately after. You know, you should learn to view yourself objectively. If you did, you would realize just how shameless you are."

"

simply enjoy his trifling, normal happiness. But you infringed on my rights, your evil calumny stole that away from me. Even if you can only live by trampling other's happiness, you should have some limits…!"

Sensing that there was no development that was going to happen, he removed them from his consciousness.

After trying to do it, surprisingly, it worked perfectly well. It seemed like they were still saying something, but fortunately, he couldn't hear anything. Couldn't feel anything. It was incredibly calming.

And after calming his heart, finally, he was able to genuinely face the place he had come in the realest sense.

"

time.

I'll prepare a body that lets us touch each other, feel each other.

With that final thought, Subaru Natsuki's being left the garden of shade—

5

—Subaru's theory was that ease of falling asleep and ease of waking up were inversely related.

To him, waking up felt like being underwater and having his head break through the surface. No one would ever forget to breathe once their head was above water. So waking up was just natural to him and not something that felt difficult to do.

"I'm jealous you can wake up so easily like that. It's always *reeeally* hard for me," had been Emilia's response when they had talked about it once before. That trouble was deeply ingrained for Emilia, and she had pretty intense bouts of low blood pressure. It sort of fit her character, but it usually took an hour or so to actually get out of bed after waking up. But the ease with which she could fall asleep was like a child, the polar opposite of Subaru.

No matter how hard he tried, when he lay down and closed his eyes, he would end up thinking about things in the dark. A large number of them were various regrets, "If I had only…" and "If it was just…" and the like. The regrets were about things that had happened that day and things in the past. Whatever his mind happened to drift to.

And while he was fighting all those thoughts, Subaru couldn't manage to fall asleep. That was the root of his trouble sleeping.

As more regrets piled up, Subaru Natsuki's sleep became worse and shorter.

—So the events in the sand labyrinth would surely disrupt his sleep in the future.

"

In fact, it was a familiar feeling. The nice firmness and height that he had experienced sleeping in the carriage so many nights on the road already…

“—Gh, I’m in the carriage?”

He was sleeping in the carriage that he had been separated from when everything was swallowed up in the rift that had opened up in the sky.

Realizing that, Subaru scrambled to sit up when he felt something holding his right hand. Looking to the side, he stared in wonder.

“

If he couldn't celebrate their reunion out loud, then he could at least do it like that.

Beatrice sighed and feigned disinterest as Subaru pulled her close with his left hand and hugged her tightly.

"Thank goodness…really, thank goodness. I was seriously worried."

"…That's Betty's line. We were terrified when you and the elder sister disappeared… Really…"

Beatrice looked away as she responded, rubbing her forehead against his chest. Stroking her head, the two of them assured themselves that they had safely reunited.

Looking refreshed, Beatrice lifted her head from his chest.

"Anyway, I need to let everyone else know that you are awake now."

"…Right, is everyone safe? The ones who were with me and everyone else, too?"

"You can relax. Everyone has reached this place safe and sound."

"I…see… I see…!"

Subaru's anxiety eased a bit at Beatrice's confirmation. Hearing that everyone was safe was a relief.

But the next moment, he felt a terrible sense of déjà vu and looked up.

"Wait, Beako. I don't want to suffer a premature celebration again. Is everyone really okay?"

"How rude. Do you think Betty would lie about something like that? This isn't a joke."

"I understand the annoyance, but I'm not doubting you. I know you wouldn't lie about that. But we just had this same thing happen in Pristella."

"That is…true."

Realizing why Subaru was on guard, Beatrice's expression hardened as she nodded.

After they had finished the fighting against the Witch Cultists in Pristella, Subaru had gotten the same sort of report that everyone was safe. And as far as everyone else knew, that was true, but—

"Me, Emilia, you. Ram and Rem and Patlash. Anastasia and Meili and Joseph…and Julius. All of them, right?"

"…Then it is fine. There is not anyone that you remember that Betty has forgotten."

“I see… I see… Then we can relax…”

After carefully checking for anything missed, Subaru could finally feel some genuine reassurance. He was just relieved that they had managed to get through it with everyone genuinely safe.

“How grandiose. You are always the one most in danger, so if you are safe, then everyone else will be fine, too.”

“That’s not what I meant. And you were crying in relief when you found out I was okay, too, weren’t you?”

“Betty wasn’t crying. Betty was hiding her face in your chest, so you couldn’t have seen anything. You can’t prove it.”

Beatrice puffed out her chest, pretending to be tough, but she had dug her own grave with what she let slip. On top of that, there was evidence of someone other than him having slept on the other half of his seat.

“Then what are these traces of someone sleeping here with me? Aren’t they proof that you were worried about me?”

“Those aren’t Betty’s! Trying to frame Betty. How rude.”

“Who other than you would do something that improper? No need to be shy.”

“You’ve got it wrong! Argh, you’re going to wake Emilia up.”

Beatrice forcibly changed the topic as it gradually drifted into their usual banter. Smiling at her red face, Subaru let out a long, deep breath and slowly got out of the seat. He gently slipped his hand out of Emilia’s so as not to wake her up, carefully laid her on the seat, and put a white blanket over her.

“All right, that should be good… Just to check, where are we, Beako?”

“You should be able to guess yourself. This is—”

Beatrice started to answer, but before she could finish, the situation changed.

“

bravely challenge it.

It was an extension of his desire not to let Ram or Anastasia get hurt when they were wandering that sand labyrinth. He was spurred on by an even stronger sense of duty when it came to protecting Emilia and Beatrice.

“

creepy woman wearing a cloak, black hotpants, and a bikini top.

She had long, pale arms and legs, and a bountiful bust that moved alluringly. She was about as tall as him, or maybe a little taller, and there was no question she had longer legs than he did.

She had a well-proportioned, beautiful face with languid eyes.

—Her visage suddenly overlapped with the figure Subaru remembered from just before he passed out in the labyrinth.

“…Are you…the Sage?”

The possibility that floated into his mind immediately passed his lips. He immediately regretted running his mouth carelessly. If she really was the person he was imagining, then the white light that had killed the centaur was her power.

In other words, she was also the person who had killed Subaru twice before—

“

Hearing her voice for the first time, his impression was that it was a little bit hoarse and husky. A mysterious, unreadable woman's voice, but there was also a trace of cuteness in it.

But while Subaru was struck by that out-of-place reflection, she quietly exhaled.

"…I finally found you."

With that, her expression changed.

Her gaze had been serious and almost mechanical as she seemingly tried to see through everything about Subaru, but her eyes slowly widened, and with a little bit of time, her expression changed to something that could be called a smile.

She was looking at Subaru with a broad grin.

"—Master."

"…Huh?"

"Masterrr! Arghhhhhh! I've waited sooo long!"

Subaru didn't have any time to be stunned, though. As his eyes widened, the woman was overcome by emotion, and she leaped at him, tackling him to the floor. Caught up in it, Beatrice groaned indignantly as she was pinned down, too.

But the woman didn't pay that any heed as she clung to Subaru and pushed her head against his chest with all her might.

Her long ponytail shook as she kept calling out to Subaru.

"Master! Master! It's been sooo long! I was sooo lonely! I thought I was just going to spend the rest of my life sniping everyone who approached this place!"

"W-wait! Wait a second! What?! What are you talking about?!"

"What do you mean what am I talking about?! You're sooo mean! You're the one who ordered me to do this, aren't you? You said to get in the way of anyone who tried to get close to the shrine. As for the how, well, that's my take on things."

"Not that part! Who's your master?! What are you talking about?!"

He was getting a very good feel of her soft skin, but he didn't have the time to appreciate it. Subaru desperately wriggled against her powerful grip, trying to escape.

But she seemed to have her own grievances with whoever she thought he was, and she refused to let him go.

As a result, they were locked in a grapple on the ground with Beatrice between them.

"Just let me go! I can't talk like this…!"

“No way! Not a chance! You’re definitely just going to disappear as soon as I take my eyes off you again! You haven’t changed at all! But that’s also what’s sooo sweet about you!”

“The hell you say!”

Whatever trauma she had, the woman wasn’t going to let him go. Subaru grabbed her head, trying to peel her off him as he shouted.

“Who even are you?! What is going on?!”

“What are you saying?! I’m Shaula! You know, Pleiades Watchtower’s star guardian! Master’s cute pupil Shaula!”

“Never heard of you!”

She called herself Shaula, but that was supposed to be the name of the Sage who lived in the tower. The wise, all-knowing Sage who was the person they were journeying to see.

There’s no way the Sage we were looking for is this crazy lady. I want to register a formal complaint!

And as they both held their ground, refusing to budge—

“—Oh no! When I woke up, Subaru was gone! We have to find __”

Emilia burst from the carriage, her hair a big mess from sleeping.

Anxiety filled her expression when she left the carriage only to see the two of them—three technically with Beatrice—but when she saw their wrestling match, her eyes widened.

Subaru reached out a hand to her, looking for some help.

“…Emilia-tan! Thank goodness you woke up! The truth is, she…”

“Ey!”

“Oww! Why did you kick me?!”

“I don’t know, but I feel reeeally upset!”

For some reason, Emilia was in a bad mood, so Subaru was stuck dealing with Shaula—

“P-please, just help Betty already… This isn’t a joke…!”

Beatrice’s voice was weak and hollow as their hard struggle resounded in the tower.

In the end, Subaru’s wrestling match with the (supposed) Sage of the Pleiades Watchtower continued until Julius and the others noticed the racket and came down.

With that, the party reached the place that had not been

touched for four hundred years.

The question of whether the Sage's wisdom would be able to save the people who were waiting still remained, though, as the story dived into the sea of sand and a soaring stone tower.

—The options unchosen disappeared, and the answers selected remained as the test began.

INTERLUDE

GORGEOUS TIGER RELOADED

1

—I feel like a lot of things have been left hanging.

“

“You can say that again! Wah-ha-ha, you definitely saved me there!” The man laughed and patted Garfiel’s shoulder. “Thanks, pal.”

With that, he and the others started moving to the next building,

“Yo…”

“I said I couldn’t watch, didn’t I? Lemme help, too.”

The man’s eyes widened in surprise when he started walking with them, too, but his lips wavered slightly as he broke into a grin.

“Yeah, sure thing, pal. ’Preciate it. What’s your name?”

“—Garfiel.”

Garfiel tousled his short blond hair as his green eyes narrowed.

He was looking at the cityscape before him, the signs of the massive struggle still visible beneath the annoyingly clear blue skies.

2

It had been five days since the incident in Pristella had been settled.

It was a terrible battle that could arguably be called an all-out assault by the Witch Cult, and it had left terrible scars on the city.

Not just physical damage, but also all the psychological trauma inflicted by the cultists.

At the very least, it wasn’t the sort of damage that could be healed in only five days.

Everyone in the city had been hurt in some way, big or small.

And Garfiel, despite not even being a resident of the town, was no exception.

“Boss probably saw right through what I’m thinkin’ about.”

Two days earlier, Subaru and the rest had set off on their journey to the east in search of a remedy for the scars that had been left on the city.

The legendary Sage, one of the three great heroes, was said to reside in the Pleiades Watchtower in the Auguria Dunes to the east. They were hoping the Sage might know something or have an idea that could help them resolve their deadlocked situation. That was the goal of their journey.

But it was a dangerous road that lay ahead of them. Garfiel should have been accompanying them on it as protection.

But—

"Keep an eye on Otto and make sure he doesn't try anything too rash. Also, there's no guarantee the cultists won't come back to take another shot. If that happens, we'll be counting on you."

That was the job Subaru gave Garfiel before leaving.

It makes sense. He is the one of us who values himself the least, and we can't let our guard down against the Witch Cult and their cruelty.

Fortunately, the group going with Subaru was in high spirits—Garfiel had to pay respect to Emilia's endurance. For some reason, she was even more motivated than normal despite everything she had gone through. And he couldn't remember that knight Julius, but he was clearly strong, and Anastasia, who was going to be their guide, was a tough lady.

I don't need to worry about them.

Of course, Garfiel also understood that all of that was just him making excuses for himself.

—Subaru was a guy who struggled against fate with every fiber of his being.

If he thought it was necessary, then he would have dragged Garfiel along even if Garfiel was completely busted up still. And if Subaru had said it was necessary, Garfiel would have followed him, even if he was on death's door. But—

"Just means I'm no use to him right now— There's no foolin' his eyes."

He's a veteran when it comes to reading a person's state of mind, and he could see right through me.

Garfiel could understand how his cheap bravado and the weakness that lay behind it had been compromised. He knew why he had been left behind.

"…But what do I do then? How do I…?"

He could tell that he was stuck treading water. And he even had an idea as to why he couldn't seem to move on. But he didn't know how to move on—or if he even should.

"…The hell's so marvelous about me…?"

There was a deep confusion in his listless murmur, a confusion at the final words that hero had left him.

Garfiel couldn't bear to look at how pathetic he was, so he tried to escape it by helping out with the restoration efforts around the city. His wounds from the fighting had not fully healed yet, but he had still done more than tenfold the work of a normal person.

Clearing rubble, checking inside buildings that were in danger of collapsing, he had exerted himself helping people and the restoration efforts.

When he was moving his body, when he was working to help someone else, he could forget his worries, even if only momentarily. He could avoid dwelling on the fact that he was just treading water for a little while; he could avoid anyone around him noticing his weakness.

Garfiel knew that sort of avoidance wasn't something to be praised. But there were people saved by it, and the number of people who looked up to him increased, even it was just for how much he was working.

And Garfiel had not noticed it himself—

"Oh, Garf! Super energetic, aren'tcha?! You're always someplace high!"

But if he was not so aloof and wanting to be left alone with his worries, it wasn't as if he was unloved.

3

"Hmmhmmhmmh-hmmm, hmmhmmhmmh-hmmm."

"…You're awful happy."

Garfiel shrugged as Mimi hummed a cheerful tune while walking next to him.

Taking off from the rebuild work, Garfiel was going out with Mimi to eat lunch.

Honestly, he would have rather kept working to keep his worries at bay, but Mimi couldn't be stopped, and she had effectively forced him to join her.

"Yep, real happy! Hetaro and TB kept bothering Mimi to behave. But the captain lost his arm and things are all busy, so Mimi has to keep things together as lieutenant."

"I told ya not to go gettin' so wound up."

Mimi was swinging her arms happily now, but she had been on the verge of death just a few days ago.

"Gah!"

Garfiel grabbed her by the collar, not wanting to deal with her reopening her wounds yet again.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

But as Garfiel held her light body up in the air, she broke into a

grin when her eyes met his. When he saw her carefree face, he couldn't help but feel like all his troubles were pointless.

"Even with everything that happened to you, you don't ever look troubled, do you?"

"Nope! Mimi is a superstrong woman! Did you fall in love with Mimi now? Did ya?"

"Nope."

"Okay."

Mimi didn't show any sign of being disappointed at his answer as she dexterously swung herself around and climbed up onto his shoulder. It was annoying, but if he set her down, she would start overdoing it again, so he decided to just let her have her way.

She was the bane of healers. Even though it was her own body that was at stake, she absolutely refused to rest and recuperate.

"Your brothers must always be worryin' about you."

"Ah, Hetaro and TB? You know, even though Mimi is feeling this good, they still seem a bit rough? No helpin' it, though, since they took a lot of Mimi's wounds."

Mimi was sitting on Garfiel's shoulder as she crossed her arms and nodded intensely to herself.

She was referring to the fact that her younger brothers had borne her wounds for her through their tripartite blessing. They were triplets, and seemingly, they were able to share their wounds and their exhaustion with each other.

Her brothers had shared the wound that had almost killed Mimi with the power of their blessing, and because of that, Hetaro and TB were still not completely healed up.

"Sounds like your brothers aren't gettin' much appreciation. You should be more grateful to them."

"Grateful, huh? Mimi can understand what you want to say! But Mimi is the elder sister! Hetaro and TB need to be properly scolded."

"Huh?"

"Mimi really appreciates the feeling, but if they died after getting caught up in Mimi's problems, that would be sad! Everyone's life is special! But their lives are really, really special! So it's not okay, right?"

Garfiel's eyes widened as Mimi leaned over and looked at his face.

He had half expected one of her usual incomprehensible twists

of logic.

"That's a surprisingly logical thought for you."

"Of course! Gorgeous Mimi is smart! A prime catch! Did you fall in love with Mimi now? Did ya?"

"Nope."

"Okay. Too bad."

Garfiel responded indifferently again, but Mimi still smiled, utterly undaunted.

Averting his eyes from her unreserved smile, Garfiel sighed.

"But your brothers probably feel the same way."

"Hmm?"

"If their older sister's dying, they're not gonna just not do anything, right? They'd do whatever it takes."

"Mmmmm."

He could understand Mimi's logic, too, of course. It was nice knowing that people that you cared about were desperate to help. But it was also scary.

Garfiel couldn't ask someone he loved to die with him. It wasn't something he could ever imagine himself being able to say.

What about Ram?

If it was her, I feel like she could accept dying with someone she loved or someone she loved dying with her.

But if that ever happened, there was only one person Ram would be looking at, so it was also a really annoying thing for him to imagine.

"Mmmm! No, it's still not okay! Mimi is still really mad! It's settled!"

While Garfiel was lost in his own thoughts, Mimi finally reached her own answer, hitting her hand forcefully.

"I'll thank them and then wham! They knew what Mimi would say when they did it. So if they did it anyway, then that's just how it is. Mimi is just too beloved!"

"

“Then…why did you protect me?”

Garfiel struggled to get that question out.

His heart had been strung out badly by the fact that she had covered for him and taken such a life-threatening wound for his sake. Why had she done that? What let her do something like that?

Even though she was so upset at her brothers for risking their lives to protect her, why had she risked her life like that for Garfiel, who she had only known for a few days?

Even though he had not thanked her for what she had done or expressed any gratitude for her saving him.

“Because Mimi fell in love with you, so it couldn’t be helped. It’s embarrassing.”

“—Ngh! What are you talkin’ ’bout after only a few days?”

Garfiel clenched his teeth at Mimi’s embarrassing response.

It had just been a few days. It was far too short of a time for feelings like that to develop and become this strong.

It had been almost ten years that his feelings for Ram had grown—an attachment that lasted more than half his life.

He had spent all that time with only that one girl reflecting in his eyes.

And even after all that time, he had never once thought of giving up on her. That was how much he cared about her, doing and saying everything he could for her.

So he couldn’t understand how a girl who was loved by her brothers enough that they would risk their lives to protect her could think to use her life for his sake after just a few days.

“A long time ago, Roshi said it! The requirements for a couple!”

“…Wait, wha—?”

It was an unfamiliar word to Garfiel. The next instant, Mimi leaped gracefully down from his shoulder. Turning around right in front of him, she held all her fingers out toward Garfiel.

“A couple are always together, for years, decades, even centuries, right?”

“There aren’t any that last centuries…”

“If feelings are forever, then a century is nothing! And they’re always together, but they still get in arguments, or fight over food, or stuff like that, right?”

“

who would be a really good partner because there's an electric shock the moment you see them!"

"A shock the moment you see them…"

"When Mimi saw you, she got that feeling and could tell we would be good like that! So a few days or a few hundred years is just a rounding error! Just an advance on what's to come! Like Mimi learned from the lady! The vig's ten percent!"

Mimi puffed out her chest with a smile as Garfiel heaved a sigh.

He was dumbfounded and taken aback. He had no idea what she was talking about. *Does she mean an advance on a couple centuries' worth of bond with someone who is going to couple up with you?*

"…But if you died, then it doesn't mean anything…"

"Ummm? Is your head okay, Garf?"

Mimi tapped her head as she twisted it in confusion as Garfiel challenged her interpretation.

"If we might die together, then that means we want to live together, right? And Mimi and Garf are both alive, so why are you going on about that? Worrying will just make you go bald."

"—Keh."

"Oh? You smiled? Hey, did you smile, Garf?"

Garfiel looked away as Mimi's cute, round eyes peered into his. He touched his mouth, feeling for himself that he had actually cracked a smile.

There was definitely a faint impulse to laugh.

"Mimi gets it. The Lady is always saying she can't help but smile when Mimi is around. Mimi's a goddess of good fortune!"

Saying that when you clearly don't get it at all—no, she's not the one who doesn't get it, is she? She can't put it into words, but she actually gets the most important thing.

She was clear on something that Garfiel couldn't express in words, on something that he couldn't be satisfied with.

So as much as it pained him, he couldn't help but smile.

"Mm, it's been a while since you smiled, Garf! Did you fall in love with the Mimi who made you smile? Did ya?"

"Nope."

"Okay. But Mimi is in love with you! So don't worry!"

"…Yeah, thanks."

Mimi was standing beside him, seemingly ready to tackle him at any moment. Taking advantage of her perfect positioning, he

gently rubbed her head as he looked forward together with her.

What she said wasn't enough to clear up all of the issues bothering Garfiel. There was a chaotic mess still swirling in his heart like always.

He had not come to peace with all of the regrets he had from his time in Pristella.

But it was a light for him. A guide to follow in order to reach the answers he needed to find.

"Ahoy! We've reached food! Garf! Mimi is starving!"

"I told ya before, don't go runnin' around like that! You'll reopen those wounds!"

Garfiel chased after Mimi, ducking under the curtain as she dashed into the restaurant.

They called it a restaurant, but it wasn't running like normal. Pristella didn't have enough people or supplies, so the interim council of ten led by Kiritaka was providing food rations.

The place they had come to was one of the distribution points, and it was filled with people involved with the reconstruction of the city. It was just around lunchtime, and it looked like it would be difficult to find a seat.

But just as they were looking around—

"Sir Garfiel, Miss Mimi, if you would like…"

"Oh…"

Someone raised a hand and called out to them from farther inside. Garfiel raised an eyebrow when he saw who it was.

A white-haired, blue-eyed old swordsman was offering to share his four-person table.

—Wilhelm van Astrea cut an imposing, dignified figure as he sat there.

4

The rations provided were surprisingly generous considering the city's current state.

That went for the food and the clinics, too, but it made Garfiel wonder where the city had the money to spare to cover it all.

"It is not spare capacity; it is surely just carefully choosing where to exert what little they have. If the quality of life drops dramatically, then people's hearts will waver in the face of the monumental task of reconstruction. Sir Kiritaka has thought it

through more carefully than I had imagined him capable of."

"That naive guy, huh…?"

Garfiel's fangs flashed at Wilhelm's comment as he started into his food.

Because of the battle with the cultists, Garfiel's opinion of Kiritaka had changed dramatically. He was unmistakably one of the people who had done everything he could to protect the city. He usually looked unreliable, but when push came to shove, he worked twice as hard as anyone. On that point, he had a bit in common with Subaru.

—That thought caused Garfiel's chest to ache a little bit.

"Mmm, delicious, delicious! A tasty meal is bliss! Mimi is moved!"

"Ha-ha, it is wonderful that you are in good spirits. I am sure that is a relief for Sir Garfiel as well."

"Ah, yeah."

Wilhelm's expression softened cheerfully as he watched Mimi's energetic display. Garfiel's green eyes twinkled as he responded to the old swordsman.

The two of them were comrades who had set out to take back Lust's control tower together during the fighting.

On the way there, he had not pried, and they had been split up during the fighting and had not met back up until the battle was over for both of them, but—

"Is there something you wanted to ask me?"

Garfiel was at a loss for words as Wilhelm seemingly read his mind.

Seeing Garfiel's eyes waver, Wilhelm nodded slightly.

"Of course, there are some things I cannot say, but I am in your debt for allowing me to face my wife. If there is something these old bones can answer for you, then I will gladly do so."

"*Face my wife.*" Garfiel had heard him say a similar thing before the battle as well. And if he was still saying that afterward, then that was how it was.

The opponent Wilhelm had fought really was Theresia van Astrea.

In which case, the opponent Garfiel fought really was—

"Was I really fightin' Eight-Arms Kurgan?"

"

That's my job. That's my promise with the general. But this ain't it. This ain't the summit I was lookin' for."

Garfiel clenched his fist as Wilhelm's blue eyes narrowed while he listened quietly.

Eight-Arms Kurgan, the war god, the Volakian Empire's strongest warrior. At a dozen points at least during that fight, Garfiel had been prepared to lose, to die. He had thought there was no way he could win.

And yet here he was sitting before Wilhelm. He had won against that war god and survived.

And he was proud of that fact. And the people around him considered it something to be proud of, too.

But that truth and what others thought was something entirely different from what Garfiel could be satisfied with.

"Has winning a hollow victory left an unpleasant aftertaste?"

"He was definitely a crazy opponent. But that fight… He was…"

Was that legend really someone that Garfiel's hands could reach?

That doubt, that disbelief was stirring in his fists, in his fangs, and in the depths of his heart.

"You are the one who faced him, so what you felt should be the correct answer. However, I can also understand the feeling of dissatisfaction with that answer. So if you do not mind, allow me to express what are merely my own personal thoughts—the two people that we faced both were and were not the same people they had been before death."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"There is no denying the truth of the matter that their corpses were defiled and turned into puppets by the Witch Cult. But I also believe the words they spoke in their final moments were real."

Hearing that, Kurgan's final message echoed in Garfiel's ears. The war god had left a single word for Garfiel, who had expended every last drop of his energy.

"In his last moment, he did say one word…"

"You should keep that word in your heart— That was the praise that Eight-Arm Kurgan offered up to the warrior who defeated him. It is not for an outsider to hear."

"—Ngh. But are you sure? Was that really him? He was manipulated, and dead to boot, so if…"

Even if that was fake, if everything between them was meaningless, then did that mean that the fight between Garfiel and Kurgan wasn't real, either?

Garfiel's breathing sped up at that unease and fear.

"Garf, don't go there."

"…Ah?"

"The old man looked a little lonely just now. So Mimi thinks that isn't something to push so deep into? Also, your eyes look really bad, too. Leave it alone!"

Mimi started jabbing him in the side. Garfiel furrowed his brow at the feeling of her finger poking him as he finally noticed the expression on Wilhelm's face.

Finally, he realized that he had been unconsciously and rudely prying at Wilhelm's own wound.

"…Sorry, I couldn't see anything goin' on around me."

He apologized. He had been kicking mud all over the sword devil's one-night rendezvous with his wife.

He had been forced to see his dead wife against her will and then ended it with his own sword. And Garfiel had been trampling on their parting words by suggesting it might all be a lie.

I'd have no right to complain if he cut me down right here and now for that.

But Wilhelm just shook his head.

"You needn't trouble yourself. At your age, it is only natural that you would be impatient to find your answer. Indeed, that you could bring yourself to apologize proves you are far more adult than I was at your age."

"…It's hard to believe you were ever like that."

"Not at all. I was a fool. Then…and perhaps even now."

Wilhelm looked down, as if in thought, and Garfiel felt a sting of awkward embarrassment.

Wilhelm was famed as the sword devil and the stories about him were legion, but it was hard to imagine with his genteel manner now. If anything, his words sounded like the merciful consolation of a kindly older man.

I've got a lotta things I've screwed up since coming to Pristella that I needa think about…

But either way—

"Sparing the roundabout phrasing, the two people we fought regained themselves only in the very moment of their death. Before

that moment, the skill of her sword was false… Were it not, if I had truly fought my wife in her prime, there would be no way that I at my age would have returned alive. And I can say the same for Kurgan."

"If we fought them in their prime, we wouldn't have won?"

"Neither you nor I. I would be a corpse, and you would be naught but hunks of flesh scattered about. That is the truth."

"Y-you say that, but I…"

"—Don't get cocky, kid."

—The next instant, there was a massive swell, and Garfiel reflexively leaped backward.

"

May you not end up like a certain withered old devil."

With those last words, Wilhelm walked outside.

Garfiel watched his back silently and then gnashed his teeth in annoyance. Going roughly back to his seat, he quickly scarfed down all the food that was left.

"Ah, that's bad manners, Garf!"

"I don't wanna hear that from the girl who was stealin' from my plate. Argh, damn it! I'm more pissed now than before I talked to him."

After cleaning up the empty dishes, Garfiel violently ran his hand through his hair.

Instead of his confusion clearing up, it felt like he had a whole new thing to worry about. Mimi and Wilhelm. The two of them had both solved the problem troubling Garfiel before him, and their answers weighed heavily on him.

He was one step away from being able to come to terms with his strength and with what he should be doing, but he couldn't seem to get the last bit of the way there, and it was bothering him.

"All right, let's go, Garf!"

"…You sure are cheerful. So where are we going?"

As they stepped outside, Mimi smiled as she held her hands up to the blue sky. Garfiel lined up beside her, grimacing as she cocked her head.

"Hrmmm, isn't it obvious? To your brother and sister and mom's place!"

Mimi had started walking lightheartedly. He began to follow her, but his legs stopped. His pupils shrank, and he flashed his fangs. Keeping his calm, he turned around.

"What'd you say?"

"We're going to your family's place! That's the most important thing for you right now!"

Mimi puffed out her chest at that entirely unfounded statement, and her tail was standing up straight.

She pointed straight at Garfiel, who was speechless.

"It's best to properly talk with your family! That's what Roshi taught me!"

5

"Ah! Gorgeous Tiger!"

“Whoa…be careful!”

When he saw Garfiel had come to visit, the boy’s face lit up and clung happily to Garfiel. Quickly catching him, he breathed a sigh of relief and concern.

“Watch those feet when you run. Don’t be the idiot who trips over his feet and hurts himself.”

“Oh, does it hurt to fall down? When Mimi was small, she was always splatting on the ground! Whenever it happened, Hetaro would wince. But it didn’t hurt Mimi that much. It’s a mystery!”

“That ain’t a mystery, it’s just your brother coddlin’ you too much.”

And as a result, he had a big sister who still didn’t pay enough attention to her footing even after growing up.

But setting aside Mimi’s story…

“Have things calmed down a bit here?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s okay. Mom and Big Sis are okay, too.”

Setting the boy—probably his younger brother—down on the ground, Garfiel looked up at the home in front of him.

Galek Thompson, the boy’s father and the head of the Thompson household, had not returned home. It would have been better if it was just that he was so busy with his work that he didn’t have time to come home.

But unfortunately, the reality was something else entirely. Galek had been transformed into a black dragon. Garfiel had confirmed that fact himself. Unlike the people who had been transformed into flies, it had been possible to communicate with Galek, so there was no mistaking it.

But Garfiel was reluctant to accept it on face value as something fortunate.

“Hey, Gorgeous Tiger, Dad will come back home, won’t he?”

“

As they were talking, a girl poked her head out from inside the house—probably his younger sister.

Seeing Garfiel, her expression brightened, and then it shifted to an awkward, almost embarrassed look. The expressiveness of her face was adorable, but the complicated emotions on her face were painful for Garfiel to see.

"D-did you go out of your way to come here again? You must have a lot of free time on your hands."

"Yeah, I got the urge to see you guys, but if you're not in a visitin' mood, then I can leave… Ow!"

"Garf, look people in the eye when you speak to them!"

Garfiel's lips twisted when Mimi pinched his waist from behind. But he quickly realized what she meant. Because of how pained the girl, his sister, looked.

"Supporting your mom, takin' care of your little brother… It must be rough bein' the big sister."

"—! Y-yes. So, um, if you want, I can talk with you a little bit. Adding one more person won't change much at this point."

"Not one, two."

"Adding two more people won't change much at this point, either!"

The girl's face reddened as she shouted, and Mimi and the little boy's eyes were filled with anticipation as they looked at Garfiel. Garfiel couldn't bring himself to be cold enough to betray that youthful hope.

"Then I guess I'll come in. If it's a trouble for Mom…for your mom, then I'll leave right away."

"That…"

"That would never happen, knowing our mom."

The brother and sister looked at each other and flashed smiles brimming with confidence.

And they were right.

6

"I'm sorry, you came all the way to see us, and I don't even have any refreshments ready. I'll get some tea going right now."

Saying that, Liara Thompson showed Garfiel and Mimi to a sofa and then started boiling some water and getting cups ready.

Watching her from behind as she made tea, Garfiel scratched

his head.

“Ah, sorry for droppin’ by unannounced. I don’t want to be a bother…”

“It’s not a bother at all. You don’t need to look so anxious. Even just making time to see us is quite reassuring.”

“

"…And because of that, you lost a bunch of different things?"

"There were too many things in here to begin with. I'm a bit of a hoarder by nature, so honestly it has been helpful to clear things out."

Liara stuck out her tongue playfully, but it wasn't actually anything so simple as that.

It was true the city was in a state where everyone needed to help each other. But the Thompson house wasn't exactly in a great place, either, with their main breadwinner missing. If anything, they should have been one of those receiving help.

"It's not like you guys have that much to spare. I mean…"

"My husband…Galek will come back soon. I have faith. You don't need to worry about us like that. We will be okay."

Liara slowly shook her head when Garfiel tried to press her on it.

"I've thought this for a long time. The more I worried, the more happiness slipped through my fingers. Well, I say a long time, but it's only been maybe ten years. I can't remember before that… Ah, sorry, did I surprise you?"

"…I bet that always works, but sorry, I already heard from your husband."

"Ah, is that so? …Mrgh, he would do that."

Liara smiled, just a little bit disappointed.

It was apparently a staple for her to surprise people when she revealed that she had lost her memory, and if he had heard that without knowing already, it would definitely have been a catastrophe for him.

Of course it wasn't that he didn't feel any pain hearing it now. But he could bear it. And also, even though she had lost her memories, he was stunned at how unchanged his mom's thinking was.

—"Things will be better tomorrow" had been the driving force behind almost everything his mom did.

"I was empty and had nothing, but Galek supported me these past ten years. He even gave me a cute little daughter and son… If after all that, I couldn't at least have faith in him, then what would I do?"

"

“No, I think that would be a bit much for everyone else…”

“Really? Honestly, he was pretty handsome like that in his own way if you ask me…”

Even after he was transformed, Liara still fully supported her husband. But the fact that she had accepted him all the same even though he had been changed that much had probably been a saving grace for Galek, who had been on the verge of losing himself.

—Like all the other victims of Lust’s terrors, Galek had accepted being frozen by Emilia in a state of suspended animation while waiting for a more permanent solution to come to light.

It was a decision that he had made together with Liara—it wasn’t something that others could intrude on.

“…You’re strong.”

“Yes, of course. I’m a mother of two, after all.”

Liara puffed out her chest in pride.

Though it’s not two, it’s four, but yeah, she is strong. Crazy strong. A different sort of strength than what drives a fist. The sort of strength that Subaru and Otto have.

And that was surely a strength that Garfiel couldn’t gain through training.

“Right, while I remember, there was actually something I wanted to ask you, Mr. Gorgeous Tiger.”

As Garfiel’s eyes lost focus, Liara suddenly hit her palm.

Seeing her casual attitude, Garfiel nodded.

“Yeah? Ask whatever you want. Though I doubt I know much to say…”

“No, it’s nothing too complicated. It’s just about you.”

“About me?”

“Yes— Why have you gone so far out of your way to take care of us? I couldn’t help but wonder a little bit.”

“

—Or had he been planning to just leave quietly after sharing his condolences for Galek?

His resolve had been weak to begin with, and even that frayed as Garfiel's fangs trembled weakly.

"I—I just can't look away for some reason…since you're kinda…not all there."

"Well, that is quite harsh. There's some truth to it, though, so I can't really say much."

"Not all there? As in what? Oh, hair? Mimi has that issue a little bit in fire season! But it's fine by ice season! The more you know!"

Liara and Mimi each responded in their own ways to his faltering, clumsy response.

Partway through, a bald-faced sense of relief filled Garfiel's heart. Knowing their two personalities, they wouldn't push any deeper. He could escape the situation.

Right, I need to take more time, more time to think this problem through—

"—Ah."

"Are you okay, Mr. Gorgeous Tiger?"

To his shock, when he exhaled, Liara had put her hand gently on his head.

Leaning forward, she was caressing his head. Her hand was gentle and kind, filled with parental love, as if he were her beloved child.

Why would she…?

"Why is it? Just now, you looked almost like a child who was about to cry to me."

Answering the question in his eyes, Liara looked almost surprised at her own reaction, but her lips softened as she answered.

The Liara who couldn't possibly remember and the memories that Garfiel had almost forgotten began to fuse together.

Liara's—Lisha Tinzel's—hand had soothed him like that before in the past.

The corporeal memories of that time were constricting Garfiel's heart in the Thompson's living room.

And before he even had the chance to try to resist, his feelings burst out.

"…Mom…"

"

“Mom…Mom, Mom…!”

As he let her fingers run over his head, he called Liara *Mom*.

His eyes teared up, his voice trembled, and his small body shrank down farther as he weakly gasped for air.

He couldn’t endure every weakness. It was just natural.

No matter how strong someone acted, no matter how much they fought it, when faced with their mother, everyone was still a child.

No matter how tough they tried to act in front of their mom, it wasn’t anything more than a child’s stubbornness.

“I…I… Mom…”

There were mountains of things he wanted to say. As many things as there were stars in the sky.

The number of feelings that Garfiel had given up on, thinking that he couldn’t convey them, were still gleaming radiantly inside him, exploding in rapture at the long-awaited opportunity.

They wanted to be shouted out from within the safety, the comfort of his mother’s embrace.

“…Garfiel…”

Garfiel was in tears, averting his eyes, struggling to speak. Beside him, Mimi suddenly said his name. But he didn’t know who it was directed at.

But he felt the presence in front of him inhale when Mimi said it, and he felt the fingers touching his head pull back—

“—Garfiel, come here.”

Looking up, he saw Liara in front of him, spreading her arms, smiling.

When he saw that, when he heard her say his name, his head stopped. But even though his brain froze, his body, his soul understood what he needed to do.

“M-Mom… Mom…!”

Sobbing like the child he still was, Garfiel leaped into Liara’s, into Lisha’s arms, burying his head in her chest, clinging to her.

Her gentle, kind hands caressed Garfiel’s head as he cried.

“There we go… You’re a good boy, Garf. You were always doing your best.”

“—Yeah! I always went all out, always did my best! But I made so many mistakes, but—but even then, everyone…!”

They were not complete thoughts. Even as he shared his incoherent story, Garfiel clung to Lisha.

Garfiel's fifteen years poured out of him.

Losing his mother, separated from his sister, his stubborn refusal to lose any more family, the ten years that had been shattered by Subaru and the rest—all the times that Garfiel had broken and grieved.

The love that he had lost, becoming frantic to never lose it again, everything he had trampled underfoot along the way.

And all of that was—

"…M-Mom…"

"It's okay, Garf. Mom is here with you."

Her kind words, her affection, the mother's love that he had never been able to get no matter how much he wanted it, all of it consoled Garfiel.

He knew that he was loved by his family. He knew that his sister and his grandmother loved him. And he knew in a removed sort of way that his mother had loved him. But this was the first time he really experienced a mother's love and the warmth that accompanied it.

He was sobbing. He didn't yet know the name of the emotion that was making him do that.

He didn't yet know the name of the feeling that everyone experienced as a child.

—But this burning-hot feeling is enough of an answer.

7

"Oh, did you stop crying, Garf? Is that enough? Hah, you're a crybaby, aren't you?!"

Garfiel looked embarrassed when Mimi opened the door and came back, pointing at him and grinning.

She was always so blunt and straightforward like that, but she had seemingly taken the two kids outside to leave Garfiel alone with Liara for a while. He couldn't snipe at her after she showed that much consideration for him.

"Are you okay, Gorgeous Tiger?"

"For a boy, you sure were sobbing a lot. I can't believe it. You're as bad as Fred."

The brother and sister who came back with Mimi both had their own ways of showing their concern for Garfiel.

He had been crying loud enough for it to resound around the house. His younger brother was worried about him, and his younger sister was feigning normality for his sake; they were both siblings who were wasted on him.

"…Sorry for makin' you worry."

"Hmm? What for? More importantly, Mimi is curious whether you were really satisfied. Also, a bit curious whether there would be something sweet for a snack!"

"Ah, so that's all. Sheesh."

When she said it like that, looking like she had not been thinking about anything, it made the strength leave Garfiel's shoulders. But he was grateful for her, and he patted her head gently.

"So how was Garf?"

"You should ask him, I think, Ms. Gorgeous Mimi. But he's probably fine now…back to the same Mr. Gorgeous Tiger who you love."

"Well, maybe? Garf gets things done when he needs to, after all."

Garfiel couldn't bear to listen to their sympathetic conversation, so he didn't join in. Instead, he rested his hands on his siblings' heads and put all his spirit into clearing his mind of all distractions.

In doing that, he felt an even deeper love for the two of them, who were so comfortably interacting with him.

Because the part of him that had not come to terms with it, had not felt a real connection, was now subsumed by the reality of it all.

"

“That’s the first time Mimi’s ever heard you bark!”

He couldn’t regain the composure to snap back at Mimi when she pointed out his unending worries.

Garfiel’s concerns swirled in his head as the people around him worried about him—

“Again? Weren’t you going to stop worrying about stuff all by yourself like that, Garfiel?”

“Ah, Mom…”

Looking disapprovingly at Garfiel as his eyes spun, Liara gently chided him. Seeing that, he reflexively called her Mom, and hearing that, his younger siblings looked shocked.

“Eh, why did you call her Mom, Gorgeous Tiger?”

“N-no! She’s not your mom, she’s our mom…”

“It’s okay, you two.”

Liara gently hugged both the stunned brother and the sister who snapped at Garfiel.

The two reluctantly fell silent at her soft restraint, and explaining things to them, she looked softly at Garfiel.

“Garfiel has apparently been separated from his mother. And it seems like I look similar to his mother. He was lonely, and that must be why he was crying.”

“—Huh?”

“You look like his mom?”

“Wh-what’s with that…? How embarrassing.”

Liara’s three children all had different reactions to her explanation.

Garfiel was dumbfounded as Liara confidently stated a completely wrong explanation.

In other words—

“It sounds like you didn’t say nearly enough, Garf.”

Bluntly, Mimi was right.

Even though he had been crying that pathetically and that shamefully, Liara had not realized the crux of the situation.

“I guess…that’s kind of expected, isn’t it…? Gah-ha, what is that?”

Suddenly, the strength drained from his fangs and from his body.

Was that feeling relief or disappointment?

—Garfiel realized himself that it was probably about half and half.

Feeling a bit of disappointment on multiple levels, and with it debatable whether he had even actually gotten anything done, it was still time to go.

Judging that, Garfiel and Mimi left the Thompson house.

“I’m sorry again for not being able to provide anything.”

“It’s fine! Also, sorry, I guess, for Garf crying like a baby!”

“Who asked you?! Don’t go bringin’ that back up.”

Lifting Mimi by the collar as Liara saw them off, Garfiel sighed and looked at Liara and his two siblings hugging onto her.

“You two don’t need to worry so much. I ain’t gonna steal your mom away from you.”

“I think so, too, but…”

“Hmph! Even if our father isn’t here, I won’t hand over our easy target of a mother!”

“I can’t say I disagree, but…”

Garfiel let out a wry chuckle as the two of them stiffened their guard.

As a result of Liara’s weird explanation, the two of them seemingly had misunderstood that he was there to steal away their mom— He had no intention of that, naturally, but them thinking that was a fortunate thing for him.

“So that’s how it is, huh… Fine, I get it! The bad guy’s leavin’ now.”

“Come again anytime. I’ll lend a shoulder if you ever want to cry again.”

“I’ll be workin’ hard to make sure that doesn’t happen again.”

Feeling a bit like he had been poked again in a sore spot, he turned his back on them. Still carrying Mimi, he turned his back on the family that he still had not told was his family.

As he started to leave, Liara clapped her hands.

“Come on now, both of you, say a proper good-bye.”

“Bye-bye, Gorgeous Tiger. See you next time.”

“Mrgh.”

His brother obeyed, but his sister pouted and refused.

Liara looked troubled by her adamant refusal.

“You’re the older sister, right? Set a good example for your brother. Rafi! Rafiel!”

“

Looking irritated, Liara called her by name.

When he heard that name, Garfiel felt like he had been struck by lightning.

“Ra…fiel…?”

“Yes, Rafiel… Oh, did I never introduce them properly? That’s her name. My two children, Rafiel and Fred.”

Rafiel and Fred.

He had heard the younger brother’s name plenty of times already. The reason he had not dwelled on it was probably because he was scared to notice.

Rafiel and Garfiel. Fred and Frederica.

Liara’s two children and Lisha’s two children. The similarity of their names and the meaning behind it.

“You probably don’t think it sounds much like a girl’s name, do you? I can tell that much myself.”

Coming to the wrong conclusion as to why Garfiel fell silent, his sister’s, Rafiel’s, cheeks puffed out. Hearing that, he shook his head.

“No, I think it’s a good name— Really, I do.”

“—Ngh.”

“Isn’t it?!”

Rafiel’s cheeks reddened at his heartfelt response as Liara broke into a smile.

“I named both of them. For some reason it just felt like ‘this is a good name’…and…”

“You named them?”

“Yes. When I was trying to think of cute names for them, those just naturally came to me.”

—There was no greater proof of love.

Even without her memories, without knowing anything from her forgotten life, his mother had not lost her kindness or generosity, and she had provided the love for the children she had forgotten to the new children she brought into this world.

“

“Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He broke into a laugh.

The last reservation that had remained in his heart throughout it all finally disappeared.

The feeling of his own helplessness at not being able to say what he should have said, not sharing his connection with them, all of that disappeared.

This is fine for now.

Because that’s already proof enough that we are connected.

“See you, Rafiel, Fred. I’ll come by again sometime.”

“—! Yeah, bye-bye!”

“N-next time, make sure you don’t cry!”

Tousling both of their heads roughly, this time there was a proper affection in his palm. And finally, he waved to his mom.

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll stop in again.”

—He wanted to come again, even after he left Pristella and went back to Roswaal Manor. And when that time came, he would surely bring his older sister and grandmother with him.

So until then, this is fine— Next time would be with a more positive feeling.

Because he would be able to talk about his family with all of his family.

“Until then, take care!”

Garfiel clenched his fist and was able to at least say that much resolutely.

9

“Mom, it’s nice Gorgeous Tiger is feeling better.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s…really nice.”

“…Mom, you seem kind of sad? Did you really like him that much?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s because I don’t want him to leave… Maybe because it’s a little sad watching him leave, but it’s also a good thing.”

“When will Dad be able to come back?”

“I don’t know. But I’m sure he will come back to us.”

“…Why are you crying, Mom?”

“—Maybe because I found something I’d lost.”

“I’m sorry, but thank you— I love you, Garf.”

10

Still carrying Mimi in one hand, he carried her into a room in the clinic.

There were several beds lining the room, and on the one in the back, next to the window, Otto was recovering.

“Hey, bro.”

“Oh, Garfiel. Can you spare time from helping around outside?”

Otto was sitting up on the bed, reading a book, when he noticed Garfiel. Garfiel nodded as he looked out the window.

“Yeah, a short break for now. Since there’s no telling whether you might pull something reckless while I’m not around.”

“I’m not so rash as that… Did something good happen?”

Perhaps sensing some slight difference in Garfiel’s expression, Otto probed insightfully.

Garfiel thought for a moment.

“Something good…huh? When you put it like that, I don’t really have an easy answer, but…”

“But it was a happy thing, right?”

Still hanging from his hand, Mimi’s round eyes looked up at Garfiel as he struggled to put it into words. She broke into a happy smile.

“Your face looks a lot better now! That’s proof something happy or something like that happened! That’s enough, isn’t it? That’s what Mimi thought when she tried it! And it worked!”

Easygoing as ever, Mimi grinned happily.

Her loud voice drew the gaze of several people in the room, but no one paid it any mind.

It was just natural. Just having someone there who was smiling so happily, so pleasantly, from the bottom of her heart was enough to save someone.

“Sheesh.”

“Oh, you smiled, too. Did you fall in love with Mimi now? Did ya?”

“Nope.”

“Aww.”

“No…but, you know…”

The same exchange they had had dozens of times already. But

Garf added one extra line to the end of it.

Hearing that, Mimi's eyes widened, and Otto watched their adorable exchange in silence.

My mom, my little sister and brother, Subaru, and everyone else who isn't here…

"Thank you."

It feels like I've managed to move on just a little bit.

Garf grinned, flashing his fangs.

< END >

AFTERWORD

Hello, it's Tappei Nagatsuki, the mouse-colored cat! The sixth arc has safely begun!

Thank you for joining me in Volume 21 in the main series… Wait, twenty-one?! Yeah, twenty-one. That's quite the imposing number, but thank you for coming along for the ride in this volume, too!

As the number of books grows, it brings back memories.

Generally speaking, when a series is made, it gets a numbering system. When *Re:Zero* was in the process of getting novelized at first, my editor and I discussed whether to go with Arabic numerals or Roman numerals for the numbering.

Honestly, I had pushed for Roman numerals at first, since the I and II looked really cool, but my editor was adamant about using Arabic numerals. Having reached Volume 21 now, I realize how right my editor was. The space taken up writing the roman numerals every time would have eaten into the space I had for this page of afterword, making it even more cramped.

It almost makes me wonder if the editor had predicted this situation happening.

Anyway, that was a bit too much rambling, but please allow me to turn to the customary thanks.

To my editor I, it's unusual to talk about old memories like that in the afterword, but I am grateful for your wise decision back then. And also, I am in your debt again with all the mess and wrangling around this volume. Thank you very much!

To the illustrator, Otsuka, with several new demon beasts popping up, thank you for your quick responses and exquisite illustrations! The oiran bear and the centaur were both the perfect feel.

To the designer, Kusano, thank you for doing such a beautiful job with the first Oni sisters cover since the second volume! The sixth arc is only just getting started, so I look forward to your wonderful efforts going forward!

In *Gekkan Comic Alive*, Matsuse's third arc manga has finished! It has been five years now of drawing *Re:Zero*, from the first arc through now. It has been difficult at times, but you've done a wonderful job! Thank you so much for all your hard work!

And the newly beginning fourth arc will be handled by the Haruno Atori and Yuu Aikawa tag team! And Tsubata Nozaki's *Love Ballad of the Sword Devil* series is heating up, too!

To everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial department, all the proofreaders, and all the bookstores, thank you very much for all your work!

And finally, my deepest gratitude to all the readers who continue to support this series.

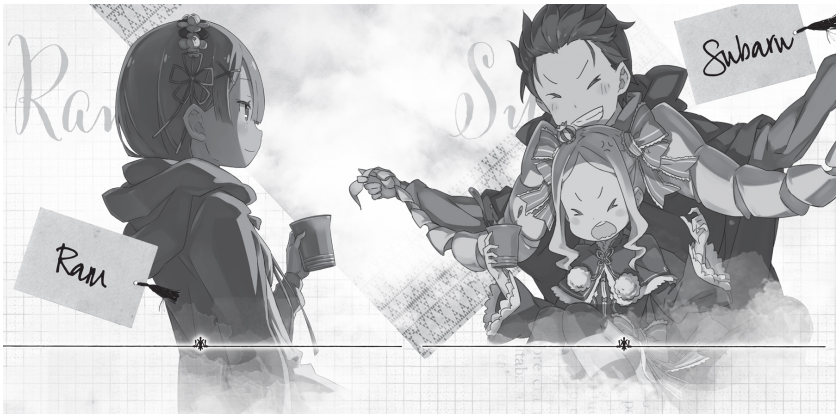
The sixth arc has begun, and the second OVA, *The Frozen Bond*, is about to be released. More information about the second season of the anime will be coming, too, so I hope you will join me in looking forward to all the developments for *Re:Zero* going forward!

I hope we can meet again in the next volume!

August 2019

<<Feeling the arrival of summer from the intense rays of sunlight>>

Cute
MONSTER
Collection
2
Diran Bear
NNN...
Disguised as flowers
Centaur
Side
Sand-worm
Open
Closed
Side


Ram
Subaru

“Cheers! To the start of the sixth arc! And with that, we move on to your regularly scheduled announcements corner. The start of an arc is the place to really put some effort into it, so without further ado, my guest this time is…”

“You’re in an awfully good mood. Are you that happy to be with me? How lewd.”

“It’s not lewd at all! But this is our first time doing the announcements together, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. This is certainly a rare pairing. Even if I would rather not be here.”

“Don’t say that! We’ve known each other a long time now, so let’s show off our top-notch coordination!”

“The next book coming out is *Ex*, Volume 4, and apparently it is going to heavily feature the knight accompanying us on our current trip, Julius. That one is coming out in December, so be sure not to forget the date.”

“Wha—? Hey! Don’t go starting without me! What happened to our top-notch coordination?! Also, it’s about Julius? Of all people?!”

“In addition, the second OVA, *The Frozen Bond*, the story of how Lady Emilia and the great spirit met, will be opening in theaters starting this fall. And there is seemingly a special short story to go with it.”

“A special story! Talk about lavish. It’s not just about Emilia-tan and Puck, either, I’m also—”

“In addition, the manga version of Arc 3 being serialized in *Gekkan Comic Alive* has finally concluded. Thinking about when the first arc started, it’s a finale over five years in the making.”

“I definitely owe Matsuse big-time for all that. After all, I’ll be drawn dying more than anyone else… Wait, isn’t that kind of a weird thing for me to be grateful for?”

“Hmph! How very Barusu of you to worry about something like that. And next is—”

“Not good, not good, not good! At this rate, you’re gonna cover everything yourself! I can’t let… Actually, isn’t that fine? It is rare for you to be so gung ho about working, though.”

“Setting Barusu’s annoying grumbling aside…right around when this volume is coming out, there will be an event for Lady Emilia’s birthday going on at Shibuya Marui starting September 20. It’s a yearly event, but still be grateful.”

“Phrasing! It’s a lot of help, though, and I am happy about it!

Next is my birthday—”

“And that was the last of our announcements. The fifth short story collection is being released at the same time as this twenty-first volume. They will be next to each other on the shelves, so please read that as well.”

“You really breezed through all that and didn’t leave anything for me to say at all!”

“And that’s all. I’ll be going now. Rem is waiting.”

“—Sheesh, say so sooner if that’s why you’re speeding through things.”

“Oy, wait up, Ram! Big Sis! I’m coming, too! Don’t go by yourself!”

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